In concluding this book, I am reminded of one of the central questions of *Piers Plowman*. Looking out over the field of folk, the dreamer wonders what it all means and what, even more importantly, he is supposed to do. Tell me, he asks Holy Church, "How I may save my soule." I have argued throughout this book that a wide variety of vernacular devotional literature insists upon the importance of collective parochial worship. Sermonists and poets often turn to parochial space, fabric, and ritual in order to understand and conceptualize the layperson’s lifelong journey to salvation. Rooted in the parish, the lay religious experience was characterized by local rituals that emphasized the creation and preservation of parochial community: font and grave, both emblems of parochial identity in sermon exempla and poetry, played an important role in assembling and shaping the parish. And as we saw in chapter 2, although penance is often understood as an individual practice, it was essential to the collective ritual life of the parish. The very process of getting oneself

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to heaven is often conceptualized through tropes—ascent and procession, for example, or cooperative agricultural labor—that foreground the shared nature of the endeavor. Indeed, although medieval Christians understood that they would be judged by God individually at the end of time, they also considered the long process of achieving salvation to be a collective enterprise rooted in parochial practice. As Emily Steiner has recently observed, even though Piers asks how he might go about saving his own soul, “community is at the heart of this desire to be saved, and the ethics of association articulates the link between being saved and doing well.” We have certainly seen such a link in the Prick of Conscience Window, in which fear of the end prompts viewers to kneel together before the altar in the here and now.

As I have shown throughout this book, medieval texts and images often celebrate the ideal of collective parochial worship. We might recall, for example, the direct relationship between penance and parochial community in Handlyng Synne, in which a cleanly confessed layman, now free of the devil, blends in with his fellow parishioners and becomes invisible to his former captor. Or we might think of the De profundis exemplum from Mirk’s Festial, in which a churchyard full of risen souls comes to the aid of the living layman who prayed for them daily. Parishioners come together in a spirit of mutual help and a shared commitment to penance. They kneel side by side in prayer, and they walk one before the other in Eastertide processions that celebrate their collective triumph over the devil. The visual rhetoric of the parish—the axis formed by font, altar, and Last Judgment mural, for example—provides further articulation of the powerful link between parochial worship and membership in the eternal community of the saved.

I have suggested that what motivates my diverse collection of texts and images is their orientation toward the parish—they are the images parishioners saw, the stories they heard from the pulpit, and the prayers and tenets they learned. Even as these texts and images promote the ideal of collective worship, however, they register a certain anxiety about the parish and its vulnerability to sin and violence. And if the poems and exempla I have considered in this book emphasize collective salvation, they also admit that not everyone will be saved: some will be deleted from the book of life, their bodies dramatically ejected from humble churchyard graves. These texts are also unfailingly attentive to the fact that, even for those who do achieve salvation, the task will not be an easy one. As we saw in chapter 3, when the fourteenth-century Shoreham poet describes the arduous climb to salvation, he reminds readers that heaven is high and that laypeople are heavy with sin. The road

2. Steiner, Reading “Piers Plowman,” 60.
to salvation is often depicted as fraught with hesitation, slothful inertia, even abject failure.

This is perhaps especially true in *Piers Plowman*. Although the poem begins and ends with the dreamer wandering on his own, it makes elliptical turns back to parochial ritual as it moves from one episode to the next. But if *Piers Plowman* is a poem about the desire to be saved and about the central role that community plays in helping Christians achieve salvation, it is also a poem about not quite or not fully getting to the parish—a poem about getting there, only to fall asleep in the middle of it all. How do I save my soul? The answer seems to be, at least in part, by trying and failing, again and again. Frustration and difficulty are inherent to the process. Devotional literature holds up the ideal of parochial worship, but it also attends to the reality of spiritual fits and starts. That it does so is, of course, in keeping with the very theology of penance. The life worthy of salvation is not necessarily the perfect life but the actively penitential life—a lifetime of confessing one’s sins, of struggling to redirect one’s movement back to God after a swerve off course, of climbing back up the ladder after a fall.

In seeking to answer a question that was on every layperson’s mind, Middle English texts locate the arduous process of getting saved in the parish and in the work that parishioners undertake there together. Even as they encourage readers and listeners to engage in self-reflection and self-reform, and even as they attend to the inherent difficulty of getting saved, late medieval authors ultimately understand the parish, its spaces, and its rituals to be the nexus of these concerns. The parish mattered because it offered a framework for negotiating a complex web of relationships between individual, community, and God. And as a place where past, present, and future came together, the parish promised an ongoing relationship between the living and the dead and positioned the here and now of the local parish in the long trajectory of eschatological time.

Middle English devotional writing looks different when we pay close attention to the parish. Sermon exempla, liturgical texts, and instructional handbooks—the parish-oriented texts at the core of this book—have often been sidelined in discussions of late medieval vernacular theology. Their sustained interest in collective worship and in the cultivation of lay spiritual community makes it clear that the parish mattered and that it mattered, moreover, at a time when laypeople were increasingly seeking out more personalized forms of devotion. Many scholars have seen the parish as a victim of “privatiza-

3. As Zeeman has suggested, *Piers Plowman* unfurls in “cycle[s] of deprivation and desire.” “*Piers Plowman* and the Medieval Discourse of Desire,” 16.
tion,” to borrow from Colin Richmond’s oft-cited article on fifteenth-century religious culture. Pews fostered privacy and “non-participation,” Richmond argues; the laypeople who occupied them “insulated themselves against communal religion,” in part by turning their attention to the books of hours that they brought with them to church.4 As I mentioned in the previous chapter, Eamon Duffy has argued against such a narrow view of books of hours. While Richmond associates primers with isolation, Duffy suggests that, by virtue of their liturgical content, these books fostered more active participation in the ritual life of the parish.5

A report written by a Venetian nobleman who visited England in 1500 offers a rare bit of insight into the relationship between primers and the parish in late medieval religious culture. In A Relation, or Rather a True Account, of the Island of England, we learn that English laypeople “attend Mass every day” and that women tend to come to church with books of hours: they “take the office of our Lady with them,” the Venetian traveler observes, “and with some companion recite it in the church, verse by verse, in a low voice, after the manner of churchmen.”6 It is no surprise that a visitor to England would notice laywomen’s penchant for primers. Beyond observing the popularity of books of hours, however, the Venetian visitor also acknowledges their association with the parish and its liturgy; women bring the books with them to church and use them during the service. Books of hours would seem to be much more closely connected to the collective context of parochial worship than we have made them out to be. We need look no further than the Office of the Dead which, in numerous primers, is accompanied by an illustration of church practice—a funeral scene in the nave, for example, or a churchyard burial. As Duffy reminds us, these books are used both privately (at home) and publicly (at church). In addition to this dual function, however, to what extent might images of church ritual allow the user to engage with collective worship, even when using the book in a more private, domestic context? To what extent do they offer a portable extension of the parish and its practices, a kind of parish away from the parish?

In addition to shedding light on the complex function of books of hours, the Venetian visitor’s account also attests more generally to the powerful draw of the parish. Although they attend mass daily, he explains, English laypeople “always hear Mass on Sunday in their parish church.”7 And yet,

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5. Duffy, Marking the Hours, 60.
7. Ibid., 23.
even as the parish continues to play a central role in the ritual lives of laypeople, the anonymous report positions it in the context of an evolving religious climate, one in which laypeople engage in modes of worship that traffic in both the communal and the individual. The Venetian nobleman’s observation that English laypeople “always” attend Sunday mass in their parish churches suggests, of course, that laypeople had a number of options when it came to church attendance and that many of them were attending masses elsewhere during the week. Indeed, we have already seen how the parish itself could offer its members a range of devotional experiences; at All Saints, North Street, parishioners understood and expressed their piety in a variety of ways—through participation in the collective liturgy of the Mass, for example, but also by way of the more personalized chapel, reading lectern, and family book. In praising the English for their regular church attendance, the Venetian traveler also hints at the complexity of English piety at the close of the fifteenth century: “There are,” he writes, “many who have various opinions concerning religion.”

I have argued throughout this book that a wide variety of fourteenth-century poems, sermons, and handbooks emphasize the importance of collective devotion and the idea that salvation is achieved through the ritual life of the parish. In attending to the parish in Middle English religious writing, this book has sought to understand how and why collective parochial worship mattered to laypeople and how it shaped their experience of devotion, their understanding of salvation, and their conception of themselves as Christians. Recent work on fifteenth-century religious culture suggests that the parish was at the heart of several heated religious debates—about the spiritual value of parish paintings and about the nature of the sacraments, for example, and even about the value of the material church as a whole. In what ways would the collective contexts of devotion continue to shape lay spiritual identity and inform laypeople’s understanding of salvation and of the relationship between past, present, and future? To what extent was parochial worship itself an object of scrutiny? Although the Venetian visitor himself seems to register something of the changing religious climate, his description of English laypeople flocking to their parish churches on Sundays certainly emphasizes the staying power of parochial worship. His observations bring to mind the opening lines of *What the Church Betokeneth*, a contemporary vernacular treatise on the church and its rituals: “The churche betokenyth ij things,” the author writes. Much more than “the place where the seruyce of God is said

8. Ibid., 23.
and songe,” it is “þe gadryng place togeder of alle true cristen people.” And
in this gathering place, he continues, they “serve God with one wylle in loue
and charyte.” For the Venetian visitor and the author of *What the Church
Betokeneth*—both writing at the very end of the fifteenth century—the English
parish church remains, above all, a ritual space in which the Christian com-
munity constitutes its best, most ideal self.

10. *What the Church Betokeneth*, 87 (lines 1–4). See also Varnam’s recent discussion of this
text and its representation of the church as “a space of ritual practice.” “Church,” 303.