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Negotiating double lives among Pentecostal youth: An Osmerian contribution to practical theology

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Background: Pentecostal youth face an ongoing challenge to remain true to their faith amid changing definitions of morality and society. Their faith may be apparent in their vibrant spiritual lives within the context of church worship, but many youth feel compelled to meet peer expectations and social norms and pressures placed on them outside the church environment. This creates a dichotomy or 'double life' between those two places, which raises questions and concerns about how faith is formed, about moral integrity and about the authenticity of youth ministry in a Pentecostal context.

Objectives: This study is intended to provide insight into what causes Pentecostal youth to divide their faith, exploring how pastoral practice can foster the authentic Christian identity of youth in modern social circumstances.

Methods: The authors conducted a desktop research methodology, which included using resources from books, journals published by peers and literature related to theology, among others. Richard Osmer's four tasks of practical theology (Descriptive, Interpretive, Normative and Pragmatic) were employed as an analytical framework to study the phenomenon.

Results: The findings of this research show that young people feel pressure from the expectations of culture, society and the modern media to create conflict between their spiritual commitments and social identities. Despite many young people wanting to live faithfully, they do not have access to pastoral support or to a nurturing faith community that attends to their complex lived experiences.

Conclusion: Osmer's framework provides an understanding of how Pentecostal youth struggle with the tension between faith and contemporary social life through a theologically and contextually based understanding. In addition, it offers appropriate methods for addressing the conflicts between faith and modern society.

Contribution: This research contributes to the practical theology community through the identification of the importance of intentionally developing holistic discipleship approaches to empower Pentecostal youth to develop authentic faith, moral integrity and resilient Christian Identity within and outside the church community.

Keywords: Christian youth; double lives; faith; practical theology; Richard Osmers.

Introduction

Background

The challenges that young people today experience in living their faith authentically in a complex and fast-changing world can be influenced by technology, social media, schools and peer groups that promote values, ideas and behaviours that may conflict with the teachings of the Bible (Lichtenstein 2019:189; Zalukhu 2025a:52), leading to living a double life, which can be confusing, stressful and make it difficult to know oneself (Wasserman et al. 2018), leading to spiritual stunting (Lucchetti et al. 2021:672) and a lack of development of an authentic Christian identity.

The church as a community of faith often struggles to provide practical guidance to address these challenges (Hohn 2017). While young people receive teachings and instructions at church, these lessons may not always connect with the realities of their daily lives. Parents, teachers and caregivers also face difficulties in supporting youth, especially when they do not fully understand the pressures that lead to double-living behaviours (Warhurst, Bayless & Maynard 2022).

As a result, there is a need for approaches that help young people integrate their faith into everyday life, so that their beliefs are not confined to religious spaces but are expressed consistently across all areas of life.

Practical theology can play a key role in addressing this challenge. According to Osmers (2011:2), it provides tools to study real-life experiences, reflect on the causes and effects of human behaviour and propose ways to respond that are grounded in faith. Osmers' (2011) four tasks of practical theology, which are descriptive-empirical, interpretive, normative and pragmatic, offer a framework for understanding the experiences of Christian youth in depth (Baron 2025:276). Through these tasks, it is possible to observe and describe their lived realities, interpret why they act as they do, examine theological and ethical principles and propose practical strategies to help them live integrated Christian lives. This study presents better ways to support youth in maintaining their spiritual growth and expression of their faith.

The concept of double lives in Christianity refers to a situation in which believers present different identities in different contexts, often acting according to Christian values in religious settings but adopting different behaviours in social environments (Fagg 2023:294). Fagg (2023) emphasised that it reflects the tension between faith commitments and societal pressures, leading to a separation between spiritual beliefs and everyday practices.

Navigating the tension between faith and social identity among Christian youth

Christian youth today are living in a world that is quite different from the one in which their parents and church leaders grew up. Bergler (2014:280) is of the view that youth are influenced by technology, social media, the school environment, peer groups and popular culture, all of which often promote values that conflict with the teachings of the Bible. These pressures can create tensions in the lives of young believers as they try to honour God while also fitting in with friends, schoolmates or society at large (Madge, Hemming & Stenson 2014:22). For many youths, this tension results in what scholars call a double life, where they may live faithfully in church or religious settings, but act differently in other social spaces. This phenomenon creates stress, confusion and uncertainty, as young people struggle with questions about their identity, authenticity and spiritual growth.

Churches and caregivers often find it difficult to support youth facing these challenges (Grcevich & Grcevich 2021:65). Traditional moral teaching and spiritual guidance do not always address the complex realities of daily life, in which youth experience conflicting messages about values and behaviour (Pulatovna 2025). Many young believers respond to this pressure by separating their faith from everyday life, creating a gap between what they profess and how they act. This double life can undermine their spiritual development and limit their ability to form a consistent and authentic identity. Buttigieg (2025:407) argues that the challenge, therefore, is not just to teach moral behaviour but also to understand the deeper struggles and to help youth integrate their faith into all aspects of their lives.

Practical theology provides a valuable means of exploring and responding to these challenges. It enables scholars and church leaders to examine real-life experiences, reflect on underlying causes and propose practical ways to support faithful living. Richard Osmers four tasks of practical theology provide a systematic framework for this kind of study (Smith 2010:111).

By using these tasks, researchers can observe and describe youth experiences, interpret the factors behind their double lives, evaluate these behaviours against biblical and ethical principles and propose practical strategies to help youth live authentically (Hannay et al. 2016:177).

This study aims to explore the lived experiences of Christian youth who navigate the tension between faith commitments and social pressures and to apply Omer's framework to interpret and understand their challenges. In analysis, this study seeks to provide practical guidance for churches, educators and caregivers, helping them cultivate authentic discipleship and support youth in integrating their faith into everyday life. Ultimately, this study contributes to practical theology by addressing a pressing issue in youth ministry, offering strategies that are both faith-based and contextually relevant and strengthening the capacity of young Christians to live consistently and faithfully in a complex world (Strong 2015:8).

Research methods and design

This study adopts a desktop research approach, relying entirely on secondary sources to explore the phenomenon of double lives among Christian youth. Desktop research involves the systematic collecting, evaluation and analysis of existing literature, reports and scholarly works without engaging in primary data collection (Wahid et al. 2025:427). This method is appropriate for understanding theoretical frameworks, previous findings, and interpretive models, particularly Richard Osmer's four tasks of practical theology, which guide the analysis of youth experiences in faith and society.

The study systematically reviews literature from multiple disciplines, including practical theology, youth ministry, sociology of religion, psychology and hermeneutics (Burgers, Brugman & Boeynaems 2019:102). Sources include books, peer-reviewed journal articles, theological essays and online publications that provide insights into identity formation, moral development, peer influence, spiritual formation and pastoral care. By integrating these diverse sources, the study aims to develop a comprehensive understanding of how Christian youth navigate tensions between faith commitments and secular pressures.

Richard Osmer's framework, comprising descriptive, empirical, interpretive, normative and pragmatic tasks, serves as the analytical lens for this research (Norton et al. 2025). Osmer's framework examines Pentecostal youth's identity struggles by describing their experiences, interpreting social and cultural influences, evaluating them theologically and proposing practical strategies for authentic Christian living. The descriptive-empirical task is applied by summarising documented patterns of double lives and identity struggles among the youth (Scheuringer 2016:403). The interpretive task analyses underlying social, psychological and cultural factors that contribute to these behaviours (Smith & Long 2023:49). The normative task evaluates these phenomena against theological principles and moral standards, while the pragmatic task explores potential strategies for fostering authentic Christian living (Magezi 2023:676). This framework links lived realities with understanding and action, revealing both causes and ways to address double lives.

The study focuses on identifying key themes and patterns across the reviewed literature, such as moral conflict where the Christian youth may believe in abstaining from substance abuse but are internally conflicted when friends invites them to parties where there are alcohol, peer influence where a young person might participate in gossip behaviour to gain acceptance from friends, even though their Christian doctrines advocates for kindness and integrity, societal pressures where social media may promote lifestyles that go against the Christian values and faith integration. The findings are synthesised to produce insights that are not only theoretical but also practical, guiding pastors, youth leaders and educators. By relying on desk-based research, this methodology allows for a critical and reflective examination of existing knowledge while situating it within contemporary challenges faced by Christian youth.

Literature review

Christian youth and identity formation

Winga et al. (2023:273) observed that identity formation among Pentecostal youth involves developing moral and spiritual identity through personal faith, church teachings and community participation. It also includes navigating tensions between Pentecostal values and broader social and cultural influences. Studies show that adolescents construct their sense of self by integrating religious teachings with subjective experiences, moral reasoning and social interactions (Arıcı 2025:454). Faith serves as a moral compass, guiding choices and shaping values, yet it must be reconciled with societal norms and peer expectations (Bag 2023:97). Scholars emphasise that moral identity is not developed in isolation; it emerges through engagement with communities, mentors and experiential learning within church and family contexts (Krettenauer & Hertz 2015:153). Youth who actively participate in faith-based practices demonstrate stronger ethical decision-making and resilience, suggesting that identity formation is closely tied to the integration of spiritual and social life.

Double lives among Christian youth

Okwuosa et al. (2020:95) found that many Christian youths experience double lives, where their public religious identity differs from their private social behaviour. Studies indicate that compartmentalisation arises from the desire to fit in with peers, avoid judgement or navigate conflicting values (Rozuel 2011:692). This behaviour is often associated with cognitive dissonance, guilt and emotional strain, which may hinder spiritual growth and authentic self-expression (Sripada 2016:1203). Causes of double lives include peer pressure, fear of social rejection and exposure to secular culture that conflicts with religious norms (Dollahite, Marks & Dalton 2018:230). The consequences, however, extend beyond spiritual challenges, affecting psychological well-being and moral consistency. Practical theology provides tools to analyse these experiences, offering insights into how faith communities can support youth in bridging the gap between their religious and social lives (Arıcı 2025:454).

Peer influence and societal pressures

The influence of peers, school environments, social media and popular culture significantly shapes the behaviour and choices of young believers (Hasan et al. 2023:111). Adolescents often prioritise social acceptance, which can conflict with religious expectations, leading to compromises in moral and spiritual behaviour (Hardy et al. 2019:455). For Macleod and Jearey-Graham (2016:249), studies highlight that peer modelling, trends on social media and societal norms create pressures that may encourage youth to hide or alter their faith practices. For instance, the desire to conform with friends can result in reduced church participation, selective engagement with scripture or secretive behaviour. Scholars argue that understanding these influences is critical for developing pastoral strategies that strengthen youth resilience, promote spiritual discernment and encourage the internalisation of Christian values amid external pressures (Zalukhu 2025b:59).

Practical theology and youth ministry

Practical theology bridges the gap between theory and lived experiences, particularly in youth ministry, where abstract theological principles are applied to real-life challenges (Zalukhu 2025b:47). Research shows that youth ministry programmes grounded in practical theology provide moral guidance, pastoral care and experiential learning opportunities that address ethical dilemmas, peer pressure and identity struggles (Smit 2015:1). Such programmes often emphasise storytelling, mentorship and reflection, enabling youth to connect faith with daily life (Wimberly 2018:180). By contextualising biblical principles within contemporary challenges, practical theology equips leaders to foster authentic spiritual formation, address moral conflicts and support youth in navigating the complexities of modern life (Simbolon & Simarmata 2023:05).

Richard Osmer's four tasks in context

Richard Osmer's four tasks of practical theology offer a systematic approach to studying youth experiences (Osmer 2011:7). The descriptive-empirical task involves observing and describing the lived realities of Christian youth, while the interpretive task examines the underlying causes of behaviours such as double lives (Lam & Warriner 2012:201). The normative task evaluates these behaviours against theological and ethical standards and the pragmatic task proposes strategies for fostering spiritual growth and authentic living (Pelegrina et al. 2015:1544).

Studies applying the Osmers framework have demonstrated its effectiveness in providing structured insights into youth ministry, helping practitioners understand complex social and spiritual dynamics while developing context-specific interventions (Tettey & Nel 2020:10).

Faith integration and spiritual formation

Faith integration is central to youth spiritual formation, emphasising the connection between religious beliefs and daily actions (King 2019:198). Research highlights that youth who integrate faith into school, work, relationships and social activities demonstrate higher levels of moral integrity, resilience and purpose (Kim & Esquivel 2011:756). Discipleship programmes, devotional practices and reflective activities have been shown to strengthen authentic Christian living, enabling youth to align personal values with scriptural teachings (Gabriel & Catherine 2025:53). Literature suggests that fostering environments where youth can practice faith in tangible ways through service, prayer and mentorship supports holistic spiritual growth and reduces the tension between faith commitments and secular pressures (Chiroma 2015:79).

Challenges and opportunities in pastoral guidance

According to Nwafor (2024:64), Pastors and caregivers face multiple challenges in addressing double lives among youth, including balancing authority with empathy, navigating sensitive topics and engaging with secular influences. Studies indicate that effective pastoral guidance requires individualised attention, active listening and culturally informed strategies.

Opportunities exist for creating supportive church communities, mentoring relationships and educational programmes that provide a safe environment for youth to explore their faith (Igwea, Peter-Anyebeb & Onojac 2025:50). Research also emphasises the role of theological reflection and practical strategies in equipping leaders to respond to moral and spiritual conflicts, ultimately guiding youth towards integrated, authentic Christian living (Mofu 2025:332).

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Results

The desktop research revealed that Christian youth often experience tension between their faith commitments and the pressures of secular culture, resulting in the phenomenon commonly referred to as double lives (Wahid et al. 2025:428). These youth tend to compartmentalise their religious and social identities, behaving differently in church or family settings compared with school, peer groups or online environments. This duality reflects a struggle to reconcile moral and spiritual values with societal expectations, peer pressure and the influence of popular culture (Ybyray 2025:398).

Zalukhu's (2025a:57) analysis of literature highlighted that peer influence and societal pressures play a significant role in shaping the behaviours of young believers. Social media, entertainment and academic environments often present conflicting values that challenge the youth's adherence to Christian principles. Consequently, youth experience internal conflict, moral dilemmas and identity confusion, which can affect their spiritual growth and sense of authenticity (Marselina 2024:129).

The review also emphasised the importance of faith integration and spiritual formation as a response to these challenges (Otto & Harrington 2016:261). Youth who receive consistent pastoral guidance, participate in small groups and engage in structured faith in daily life.

Richard Osmer's four tasks offer a structured framework for understanding and addressing these experiences (Norton et al. 2025). Descriptive-empirical insights reveal patterns of double lives; interpretive analysis and explanations of the underlying causes; normative evaluations that align behaviours with theological and ethical principles and pragmatic considerations that provide strategies for pastoral care and youth ministry interventions (Smit 2015:8).

Finally, the literature indicates that practical theology youth ministry can play a transformative role in helping young Christians navigate the challenges of living a double life (Ntsanwisi 2023:532).

By fostering a supportive community, providing ethical guidance and encouraging reflective engagement with scripture, pastors and young leaders can cultivate authenticity, moral identity and integrated Christian living (Beagles 2010:6). These findings suggest that addressing the double-life phenomenon requires both understanding the lived experiences of youth and applying theological frameworks that promote holistic spiritual development.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, it is recommended that churches and youth ministries actively implement structured programmes that help Christian youth integrate their faith with everyday life. Russell, Stewart and Higgins (2023:4473) argue that

pastors, youth leaders and caregivers should create safe spaces where young people can share their struggles openly without fear of judgement. Small-group discussions, mentorship programmes and interactive bible studies can provide opportunities for reflection, self-examination and guidance, helping youth reconcile conflicts between their social and spiritual identities (Lindström, Rantanen & Toikko 2024:415). Additionally, leveraging practical theology frameworks, such as Richard Osmer's four tasks, can assist church leaders in understanding youth experiences, interpreting their underlying causes and designing strategies that align with biblical and ethical principles (Smith & Long 2023:50).

It is also recommended that parents, educators and community leaders collaborate with churches to reinforce moral and spiritual values in broader social contexts. Educational workshops, family-based faith initiatives and digital literacy programmes can help youth navigate peer pressures, social media influences and cultural challenges while maintaining authenticity in their faith. By combining pastoral care with practical strategies, the church can empower youth to live integrated lives that reflect both their moral convictions and their societal engagement.

Conclusion

Christian youth face significant challenges in balancing their spiritual and social lives, often resulting in double-life experiences (Svensson & Strand 2024:2020). This study demonstrates that understanding these experiences through a practical theological lens, particularly using Osmers' four tasks, provides valuable insights into their underlying causes and potential solutions. The research highlights the importance of pastoral guidance, faith integration and supportive communities in fostering authentic Christian identity and moral development (Zalukhu 2025a:47). By addressing the dual pressures of faith and society, churches can guide youth towards holistic spiritual growth, authentic discipleship and meaningful participation in both church and social life.

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Competing interest

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

CRediT authorship contribution

Thalukanyo C.M. Sadiki: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. Hundzukani P. Khosa: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. Both authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Data availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, Thalukanyo C.M. Sadiki, on reasonable request.

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