

Liminal Prophets:

Toward A Theology of Youth After Pentecost

Joy Qualls, Biola University, USA

Wayne Choong, City Harvest Church, Singapore

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ABSTRACT

The study of youth within Christian and Pentecostal scholarship has remained “data-rich but theory-poor,” trapped within a functionalist cage that treats adolescents primarily as objects of institutional retention or instruments for church growth. While we possess exhaustive social-scientific data on patterns of engagement and attrition, we lack a robust, systematic inquiry into adolescence as a unique site of Spirit-activity. This paper addresses that theological deficit by shifting the focus from a practice of youth ministry (*how* to lead them) toward an ontology of youth after Pentecost (*who* they are in the Spirit). Drawing on the “all flesh” mandate of Pentecost in Acts 2 and situated within the conditions of liquid modernity, I propose the ontological category of the **liminal prophet**. This paradigm reframes the biological and social instability of adolescence not as a developmental deficit to be managed, but as a “perpetual Upper Room” – a sacred threshold space of ongoing Spirit-encounter that mirrors the groaning of the Spirit (Romans 8). Ultimately, this research calls the Pentecostal academy and church to move beyond “retention management” toward a spiritual partnership that recognises the liminality of youth as a vital gift, one that resists the church’s ossification into a static monument and helps sustain it as a living, breathing movement.

I. Introduction: Shifting the Horizon of Youth Research

For decades, the academic and ecclesial study of youth has been “data-rich but theory-poor.” We possess an ever-growing library of sociological mappings ranging from longitudinal studies on disaffiliation, to psychological profiles of adolescent development, and strategic manuals for institutional retention, yet we suffer from a profound theological deficit. In both broader Christian scholarship and the Pentecostal tradition, young people are frequently viewed through a functionalist lens. Often treated as objects of transmission or fuel for revival, the conversation consistently prioritises *how* the church might retain them rather than *who* they are in the Spirit.

The overemphasis on Practice (how to lead them) and the Social Sciences (how they behave) has effectively sidelined an Ontology of Youth (who they are). By framing adolescence primarily as a developmental liability to be managed or a missional instrument to be deployed, we risk missing the unique activity of the Holy Spirit within the adolescent experience itself. At the Asia Pentecostal Summit 2025, a year ago, we began this discussion under the title *Youth as Pneumatological Agents*. This paper aims to take it further by bridging the gap between empirical observation and robust theological reflection. In the following sections, it will map the existing **theological deficit** within youth research, propose the parameters for a **Theology of Youth After Pentecost**¹ (TOYAP), and advance, as a substantive contribution to TOYAP, the ontological category of the **Liminal**² **Prophet**, reframing adolescent instability not as a deficit, but as a primary pneumatological site.

¹ The phrase “after Pentecost” is used throughout in the participatory sense developed by Yong (2019), denoting a theology that thinks *from within* the ongoing pneumatological reality that Pentecost inaugurated, rather than treating Pentecost as a closed past event.

² *Liminal* here drawing on Victor Turner's (1969) anthropological concept of the “threshold condition,” is the state of being betwixt and between established social identities.

By shifting our gaze from the “what” of social-scientific data and the “how” of studies on youth ministry, to the “who” of pneumatological ontology, we move toward a recognition of youth not as problems to be solved, but as essential Spirit-bearing subjects within the ongoing movement of the Spirit. In this way, the paper seeks to move beyond the social science of youth and theology of youth ministry, toward a theology of youth itself.

In the pages that follow, Section II maps the existing theological deficit in youth scholarship, diagnosing its data-rich but theory-poor character across Christian and Pentecostal traditions. Section III proposes the Parameters of a Theology of Youth After Pentecost (TOYAP), structured around a Foundational Quadrilateral and three distinctly pneumatological Pillars. Section IV advances the central constructive contribution of this paper: the ontological category of the Liminal Prophet, situating adolescent liminality as a pneumatological site of prophetic formation. Section V concludes with a call for prophetic partnership between the academy, the church, and the young.

II. Literature Review: Mapping the Theological Deficit

1. Data-Rich but Theory-Poor

The academic study of youth in Christianity has never been more productive in *empirical* terms. Research institutions like the Barna Group have generated extensive longitudinal datasets charting adolescent belief, disaffiliation, and the conditions of faith retention across generations. The three-part *Open Generation* report (Barna Group, 2022) is illustrative: while meticulous in its empirical mapping and granular in its demographic analysis, it remains largely silent on the very question that undergirds every practical recommendation it makes. *Who, theologically, are the young people being studied?* Data abounds but theology lags.

An explicit diagnosis of this deficit can be found in Root and Dean's (2011) landmark *The Theological Turn in Youth Ministry*, which critiques the dominant model of youth ministry as pragmatically successful but theologically impoverished. Their intervention was critical, inspiring and provoking a generation of scholars to ask not only *how* to retain young people, but *why* youth ministry exists in the first place. However, even this “theological turn,” remains oriented primarily toward ministry practice rather than ontological inquiry. The orienting question remains stubbornly functional: *what must the church do to keep its young?*

This gap between data and theological reflection has not gone unnoticed. Writing in a recent editorial of the *Journal of Youth and Theology*, Corrie (2026:2) observes that while the journal has long sought to bridge theological and youth-oriented scholarship, the “limited length of journal articles” combined with institutional dependence on social scientists for “credible data” continues to militate against the kind of “robust theological reflection” the field urgently needs. That even a flagship publication of the discipline acknowledges this disparity is a clear call to deepen our theological understanding of young people. This paper answers that call.

2. Practice-Heavy but Theology-Light: Retention-Management theology

The dominant strand of contemporary youth ministry literature is *practice-heavy* and *theology-light*. Its organising concern is survival: how does the church retain its young people in an age of rising disaffiliation? This concern is legitimate and pastorally urgent, but it has produced a body of scholarship whose primary categories are programmatic rather than theological, let alone pneumatological.

Smith and Adamczyk's (2021) *Handing Down the Faith* offers a sophisticated sociological account of intergenerational transmission, demonstrating persuasively that parental

religious socialisation remains the strongest predictor of adolescent faith retention. Powell et al.'s (2016) *Growing Young* and *Sticky Faith* (Powell & Clark, 2011) provide churches with six-point strategies and diagnostic frameworks calibrated toward institutional sustainability. Emblematic of this trajectory is Kinnaman and Hawkins' (2016) *You Lost Me*, which famously categorised young “dropouts” into Nomads, Prodigals, and Exiles. While they articulated the cultural realities and pressures of the digital age, their work inadvertently fuels a recovery-based architecture. By framing these typologies as problems of “disconnection,” the literature following theirs has largely focused on how to “reconnect” the young to the institution. Powell et al.'s (2024) more recent *Faith Beyond Youth Group* falls along the same vein, arguing for the integration of youth into the broader congregational ecology. Taken together, these works constitute a pragmatically productive body of literature. What they *do not* constitute is a theology of youth. Their implicit “theology”/anthropology treats adolescence as a transitional liability to be managed rather than a mode of human being to be theologically honoured.

Even Andrew Root's *The End of Youth Ministry?* (2020), which calls the field to attend to the *personhood* of the adolescent rather than the *programme* built around them, remains anchored in ministerial concern. Root asks what youth workers should do differently; he does not ask what the Spirit is doing in youth *as they are*. The ontological question, “*who is the young person, before any ministry is directed toward them?*” is hinted at but never fully actualised.

This tendency across the literature to direct theological energy in service of ministerial outcomes entrenches a pattern where youth are studied as *subjects of pastoral concern*, rather than as *theological subjects in their own right*.

3. The Pentecostal Gap: Instrumental theology

If the study of youth within Christian scholarship is “theory-poor” and theology-light, the Pentecostal tradition's engagement with youth theology is even more sparsely developed, taking on a distinctive shape. Within Pentecostal scholarship, youth appear most consistently as *agents of mission* – instruments for renewal, catalysts of revival, and evidence of the Spirit's generational reach. The interest is real, but instrumental: youth matter insofar as they *do* something for the Kingdom. Ma et al.'s (2025) volume *The New Generation and the Holy Spirit*, for example, marks a genuine step toward theological and pneumatological attentiveness to generational dynamics. Yet its organising logic remains largely missiological. The Spirit poured out *upon* young flesh is celebrated; the *flesh* upon which the Spirit falls (the liminal particularities of adolescence, of being “between”, of not-yet-ness) is not itself theologically interrogated.

This instrumentalisation bias is not malicious. It reflects the Pentecostal movement's deep investment in eschatological urgency and missional energy. However, it does carry a theological cost. It communicates that a young person's value is conditional on their missional function, effectively collapsing a theology of youth into a theology of youth ministry.

4. Emerging Voices: Bridging the Gap

A small but significant set of scholars has begun constructing a genuine theology of youth. Štěch's (2016: 134) *Who are Youth in Theological Perspective?* represents one of the earliest systematic attempts to pose the ontological question directly, arguing for distinction between a theology *of* young people, *with* young people, and *for* young people. Stanton's (2021) *Towards an Integrated Theology of Youth* extends this trajectory, arguing for a holistic

framework that refuses to dichotomise the spiritual and developmental dimensions of adolescent life. His insistence on integration – rather than the importation of theological language onto an essentially social-scientific substrate – represents methodological progress.

Root's work (2020), while ministry-oriented as noted above, does gesture toward the theological weight of adolescent experience. His resistance to purely programmatic approaches represents a legitimate departure from management literature. Dean et al.'s (2020) *Delighted: What Teenagers Are Teaching the Church about Joy* offers a significant posture of theological receptivity toward youth, positioning young people as sources of theological insight and bearers of gifts the church needs to receive. This inversion from formation-object to gift-bearer is theologically significant, though the book does not develop the pneumatological architecture needed to sustain the claim. That architecture is precisely what the present paper attempts to provide.

5. Why a Theology of Youth Is Critical Now

This project carries academic, ecclesial, and contextual urgency. However, any constructive account of youth must first recognise that “youth” is neither a static nor self-evident category.

“Youth” as we understand it today is a remarkably recent construct. While Hall's (1904) *Adolescence* provided the psychological legitimacy for the concept, Kett's (1977) *Rites of Passage* demonstrated that it only emerged as a distinct life stage in the late nineteenth century. Sociologists have since maintained that youth is socially constructed, shaped by socio-historical conditions, institutional arrangements, and cultural expectations rather than by biology alone (Elder, 1998; Shanahan, 2000; Brannen & Nilsen, 2002; Thomson, 2002; Plug et al., 2003).

Consequently, the “young” of Scripture do not map neatly onto our contemporary categories; biblical youth were bound to vastly different life expectancies and social structures. This distinction, however, does not weaken the relevance of biblical witness, rather, it importantly reminds us that theology must interpret youth across shifting social forms instead of assuming a fixed age category.

The sociology of youth reveals that the transition from adolescence to adulthood has become increasingly protracted and non-linear. Whether framed as Arnett’s (2000, 2004) “emerging adulthood” or Côté’s (2000) more critical “arrested adulthood,” adulthood is delayed by prolonged education, precarious labour, and extended familial and institutional dependence. The result is a phase defined by instability and a persistent sense of being “in between.” In other words, the church is not merely engaging a biological stage, but a socially elongated and culturally volatile condition.

This fluidity of youth has only intensified within our liquid-modern landscape (Bauman, 2000). In the digitalised, hyper-connected, urban centres of Asia and around the globe, youth have become the most visible yet most commodified demographic in public life. Bauman's account of liquid modernity (2000) describes a social order in which identity, commitment, and meaning are perpetually in flux, institutions lose their solidity, and individuals are left to continually construct and reconstruct selfhood with diminishing structural scaffolding. Adolescence, already a period of developmental flux, is amplified by this condition. Young people must narrate their lives in real-time, across multiple platforms, within a market economy that captures their attention, harvests their data, and then sells their identities back to them as product.

The church is not immune to this tendency and must resist treating young people merely as projects or products of formation. A robust theology of youth counters this commodification by insisting on the ontological dignity of the young person as a fully human, *already* image-bearing participant in the Spirit's ongoing work (Štěch, 2016; Stanton, 2021). If adolescence is no longer a brief transit but an extended, *sacred interval*, then the young person's instability, digital "tinkering" and "liquid faith" (observed among Singaporean youth) are not symptoms of a delayed maturity (Choong, 2026a; 2026b). Rather, they represent a vital mode of being. By constructing youth as a pneumatologically significant site, we recognise that their testing, fumbling, and feeling out of the world, is the church's most honest prophetic response to a society in flux. They serve as a reminder to the wider church that in this liquid world, we are all perpetual pilgrims. To frame their journey as simply a crisis of faith or retention problem, is to misread the spiritual significance of their lives.

What is needed, then, is not a more sophisticated ministry strategy for digital youth. But a *theology of youth that begins from the Spirit's presence in adolescent life* – embracing it in all its ambiguous, liminal, and unstable glory.

III. Parameters of a Theology of Youth after Pentecost (TOYAP)

If scholarship on youth is, as argued above, "data-rich but theory-poor", then the corrective cannot be more empirical data, it has to be systemic and theological. What is needed is a framework sturdy enough to bear theological weight, yet flexible enough to remain contextually responsive. As an emergent field in Pentecostal theology, this section aims to chart the Parameters of a Theology of Youth After Pentecost (TOYAP), as a two-tiered structure

consisting of a Foundational Quadrilateral and a set of Pillars After Pentecost that press beyond classical methods toward a distinctly pneumatological account of adolescent existence.

1. The Foundational Quadrilateral

A TOYAP must first be accountable to the *classical* sources of theological reflection. The Wesleyan Quadrilateral – Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and Experience – provides this accountability. As Randy Maddox (1994) has argued, the Quadrilateral is not a flat democracy of four equal sources but a weighted hierarchy, with Scripture exercising normative authority over the remaining three. This asymmetry prevents TOYAP from collapsing into cultural accommodation on one side or ahistorical biblicism on the other. What follows will be a brief note on the affordances and application of each source with respect to a TOYAP.

Scripture as normative ground. A theology of youth must move beyond a hermeneutic of permission focused on reactive proof-texting. The instinct to cite scriptures like 1 Timothy 4:12 (“Let no one despise your youth”) in isolation, simply to defend the position of the young and justify the need for youth ministry, has produced a thin biblical theology of youth. A robust TOYAP demands a sustained exegetical engagement that treats young people as primary theological subjects. Eschatologically, for example, Craig Keener (2012) notes that Luke’s deliberate reversal of the Joel prophecy in Acts 2:17 placing the “visions” of the young before the “dreams” of the old signals a pneumatological priority. The Spirit’s arrival does not just disrupt social and age-based hierarchies, it positions youth as the forerunners of eschatological witness (cf. Acts 5:6, 10; 7:58; 20:9; 23:17-18, 22). Ecclesiologically, the commissioning of Jeremiah as a self-described *na’ar* (child/youth) in Jeremiah 1 finds its theological fulfilment in the Pauline theology of the body (1 Corinthians 12). Jeremiah’s lament that he lacks the social

standing or weight to speak is corrected by Paul's assertion that the members who seem weaker or less honourable are, in fact, indispensable. Read together, these texts argue that the youth's status as a *na'ar* is not a deficit to be managed, but a vital "organ" that the Body of Christ cannot function without. Scripture must not merely be used to authorise youth ministry, it must provide the theological and ontological categories through which youth are recognised as pneumatological agents and theological subjects (Qualls & Choong, 2025).

Tradition as continuity and disruption. Tradition functions as a necessary continuity amidst change. For Pentecostal theology, this function is most sharply expressed in the Fivefold Gospel: Jesus as Saviour, Sanctifier, Spirit Baptiser, Healer, and Coming King. This *regula fidei* provides the grammar within which youth theology must remain legible. A TOYAP that produces a portrait of youth so avant-garde as to be unrecognisable within this grammar has ceased to be Pentecostal in any meaningful sense. At the same time, tradition properly understood also includes the transgressive. Spirit-led disruptions of tradition, with Azusa Street being the paradigmatic case, opens interpretive space for youth to be precisely the kind of liminal pneumatological agents who have historically renewed tradition rather than simply receive it.

Reason as coherence. A TOYAP must be internally consistent and publicly defensible. It cannot rest on sentimentality about young people, nor exempt itself from rational scrutiny. Reason here functions as the demand that theology accounts for what sociologists and developmental psychologists have established about adolescence, not to be governed by those disciplines, but to be in honest dialogue with them. This is especially urgent when engaging with continually and rapidly evolving youth cultures in liquid modernity. A TOYAP that cannot

reason coherently with the socio-cultural “somatopsychospiritual”³ realities of adolescence will be easily dismissed as naïve advocacy (Benner 1998; Scazzero 2017).

Experience as contextual relevancy. In the Pentecostal tradition, experience has never been peripheral to theological reflection. In fact, the lived experience has been the site of its articulation. A TOYAP takes seriously the *signs of the times* as theological data: the specific textures of youth experience in liquid modernity (Bauman 2000), in the digital spaces of contemporary Asian urban life, and in the ecclesial margins where many young people currently reside (cf. 1 Chronicles 12:32). This is not the reduction of theology to sociology; it is the recognition that the Spirit speaks *through* particular contexts, and that the failure to attend to those contexts is a failure of theological seriousness.

2. Pillars after Pentecost

While The Wesleyan Quadrilateral provides a necessary foundation, it is not sufficient for a theology that takes Pentecost as its generative horizon. The designation “after Pentecost”, drawing from Yong’s (2019) pneumatological framework, is a theological posture that takes the event of Pentecost as its normative point of departure. A theology of youth **after Pentecost** is, in this sense, a theology accountable to what Pentecost inaugurated and opens up, not a theology that has moved away from it. The following pillars press beyond the foundational quadrilateral, to articulate the specifically pneumatological claims that distinguish a theology of youth, *after Pentecost*.

Pillar 1: Pneumatological Inclusion. The exegetical centre of a TOYAP is Acts 2:17’s assertion that the Spirit is poured out on “all flesh” (*pasa sarx*), a pneumatological

³ A concept introduced in Benner’s (1998) *Care of Souls*, “somatopsychospiritual,” refers to the integrated bodily/embodied, psychological, and spiritual dimensions of human experience.

democratisation that explicitly names age as a category that the Spirit transgresses. Frank Macchia's (2006) reading of Spirit baptism as "crown of creation" and universal gift is instructive here: if Spirit baptism is the eschatological gift *given to all*, then any ecclesial structure that treats youth as permanently pre-pneumatic, awaiting sufficient maturity before they are recognised as full participants in the Spirit's economy is, to use Paul's language, tantamount to the *quenching* of the Spirit (1 Thessalonians 5:19). Amos Yong's (2005) pneumatological anthropology grounds this institutionally: the Spirit is not distributed according to social hierarchies of maturity, credentialing, or ecclesial position. Youth are not *becoming* Spirit-bearing subjects pending some threshold of formation. They already are. The question a TOYAP must press is not whether youth receive the Spirit, but whether the church has the theological categories to recognise what the Spirit is doing in and through them.

Pillar 2: Charismatic Ontology. If Pneumatological inclusion establishes that the Spirit is *given* to youth, charismatic ontology establishes what that gift *makes* them. Yong (2011a: 156) argues that Pentecost overturns the assumption that age and "the sageliness that comes with that" are prerequisites for revelatory insight. Rather, "youth, or young men, are not inhibited from seeing visions." Therefore, this pillar insists that youth identity be narrated not primarily in terms of deficits (e.g. immaturity, instability, hormonal disruption) but in terms of Spirit-endowed capacities for *charismata*: prophecy, vision, discernment, hospitality, and creative improvisation. Youth are Spirit-bearing subjects; "pneumatological agents" whose charisms, experiences *and* instabilities, all contribute to the church's doctrine and practice – a reality further discussed recently in conversation and collaboration with Pentecostal youth (Qualls & Choong, 2025). The tinkering posture characteristic of adolescent engagement with digital and material culture that is iterative, experimental, comfortable with unfinishedness, is not developmental immaturity

(Choong, 2026b). Read pneumatologically, it is a mode of charismatic prophetic discernment appropriate to a liquid world. The charism is not in spite of their instability; very often, it is expressed *through* it.

Pillar 3: Eschatological Presence. With the young person's charismatic ontology in mind, this pillar of eschatological presence asserts that the Spirit situates youth within the Kingdom's present reality. Unfortunately, the dominant ecclesial imagination of youth is temporal: young people are figured as the *future* of the church, the *next generation* of leaders, the "*not yet*" in whom promise is deposited but to be fulfilled later. This eschatology is lacking. Keener (2012) demonstrates through his analysis of Acts 2 that the outpouring of the Spirit is the definitive inbreaking of the Age to Come into the present. By placing the visions of the young at the forefront of the Pentecostal phenomenon ("*your young men will see visions*" Acts 2:17), the text asserts that youth are not waiting for a future role; they are the immediate site where the Kingdom's newness is revealed. Vondey's (2010, 2018) theology of divine play, which suggests that the Spirit-filled life is an improvisation suspending the "old rules" of the world further illuminates the eschatological significance of youth. In this light, adolescent liminality and experimentation are not signs of immaturity, but a form of pneumatological play, serving as a foretaste of the Kingdom's freedom, in the here and now. A TOYAP refuses the adult-in-waiting model, asserting that youthfulness is not a stage to be outgrown but a vital, present witness.

These parameters – four foundational dimensions and three Pillars After Pentecost – might not exhaust what a TOYAP might say. But it establishes what it *must* say if it is to be simultaneously pneumatological, ecumenical in its articulation, contextually honest, and intellectually robust about the limits as well as the gifts of adolescent existence. It is to a substantive contribution to the library of a theology of youth after Pentecost that we now turn.

IV. Youth as Liminal Prophets

1. *Liminality as a Pneumatological Category in Pentecostal Thought*

Any attempt to construct a pneumatological theology of youth must not just centre adolescence but appreciate its liminality. Specifically, the appreciation that liminality is not a foreign import into Pentecostal thought but one of its most native spiritual logics. Arnold van Gennep's (1960) *The Rites of Passage*, expanded by Victor Turner's (1969) foundational anthropological work, *The Ritual Process*, describes liminality as the threshold condition of those who are "betwixt and between". Persons who have left behind a prior social status but have not yet arrived at a new one. In this interstitial space, ordinary social rules are suspended, hierarchy flattens, and the self becomes unusually porous and open to transformation.

What Turner described anthropologically as social theory, Pentecostalism enacts liturgically as sacred practice. The posture of waiting, tarrying, praying in the Spirit, the crowded altar call, the extended immersive corporate worship, singing in the Spirit, the prayer meeting that stretches into the early morning, retreats and "encounter nights", these are, in structural terms, deliberate constructions of liminality. They are sacred threshold spaces in which ordinary identities (student, consumer, "Gen Alpha") are surrendered and new vocations received, in which the boundary between heaven and earth collapses. As Cheryl Bridges Johns (1993) argues in *Pentecostal Formation*, Pentecostal spirituality operates as a "religion of the groan", a transformative pedagogy (a way of being taught by the Spirit) forged not in the settled classroom but in the trembling threshold. Drawing on Paulo Freire's concept of *conscientisation* (the awakening of critical awareness/consciousness), Johns suggests that authentic formation requires a disruption: the stripping away our false consciousness and the revelation of transformative

awareness through direct encounters with the Spirit. Liminality, therefore, on this reading, is not a problem to be solved. It is the very condition in which the Spirit works most decisively.

The paradigmatic liminal space is the Upper Room of Acts 1-2. One hundred and twenty disciples – men and women, old *and young* – gathered in a posture of waiting. They were, in Turner's precise sense, “betwixt and between”: no longer following the localised, physical presence of the earthly Jesus, but not yet launched as the empowered, global, Spirit-filled apostolic Church. They occupied a threshold suspended in prayer, stripped of programme, uncertain of outcome. It was precisely in this state of not-yet that the Spirit fell with volcanic force, inaugurating the age of prophetic universality. The Upper Room is, hence, a theological type. It establishes liminality – the surrender of settled structure – as the normative site of pneumatological encounter.

This carries immediate consequences for a theology of youth. If liminality is the condition in which the Spirit characteristically moves, and if adolescence is – biologically, psychologically, and socially – a state of profound and prolonged liminality, then youth is not a developmental deficit requiring institutional management, but a pneumatological site requiring holy listening (Guenther, 1992). It is a *perpetual Upper Room*: an extended threshold space and time in which the conditions for Spirit-encounter are, structurally speaking, continuously present. The young person who is no longer a child but not yet a settled adult, who questions inherited frameworks while experimenting with possible futures, by the very nature of their developmental moment, inhabits precisely the interstitial space Pentecostalism recognises as fertile ground for pneumatological formation.

Indeed, the church's (and wider society's) instinct to rush youth through this liminal phase, to “settle” them as quickly as possible into the stable categories of adult Christian

commitment, may itself betray a form of spiritual impatience. Adults often mistake stability for faith. But the Wind of the Spirit, the *Pneuma*, is itself characterised by movement, unpredictability, and the refusal to be contained (John 3:8). A youth's kinetic-liquid faith, marked by questioning, experimenting, and provisional commitment, may reflect not immaturity but a genuine pneumatological resonance: an embodied liquidity that corresponds to the freedom of the Spirit who blows where it wills.

2. The Ontology of a Liminal Prophet

To speak of youth as liminal prophets is to make a claim that is simultaneously ontological, pneumatological, and ecclesiological. It is ontological because it locates the significance of youth not in their future utility but in their present mode of being. It is pneumatological because it grounds that significance in the activity of the Spirit. It is ecclesiological because it insists that this significance constitutes a gift to the whole community of faith, not merely a potential to be cultivated but a voice to be heard.

Before articulating this ontology, it is worth situating the present argument in relation to the broader landscape of theological perspectives on youth. Graham Stanton (2021) has performed the invaluable service of mapping eight distinct theological framings through which the church has approached young people: as sinful creatures, gifts of God, developing beings, candidates for conversion, vulnerable persons, full image-bearers, a prophetic presence, and a prophetic voice. Stanton rightly observes that the field has typically deployed one or two of these perspectives in isolation, producing what he, citing Bunge (2006:562), calls “narrow and destructive understandings” that fail to honour the full complexity and dignity of young people. His proposed integration grounds all eight perspectives in the Genesis 1 triad of God, humanity,

and creation, which recognises adolescents as fully capable bearers of the divine image with both distinctive strengths and genuine needs. This is a significant contribution to the field, and the present argument concurs with Stanton's basic affirmation that youth are fully human image-bearers rather than adults-in-waiting.

However, the Liminal Prophet paradigm proposed here presses further than Stanton's (2021) integrative model in one decisive respect. Stanton's architecture is primarily *creational*: it situates youth within the God-humanity-creation nexus and reads their prophetic capacity as flowing from their created reality as adolescents (their traits, cultural location, and emerging social agency). While theologically sound, a creational anthropology remains insufficient for a theology of youth *after Pentecost*. Operating within the "all flesh" mandate of Acts 2, the liminal prophet is not merely a young person whose created reality makes them a prophetic presence and voice; rather, they are individuals whose Spirit-imbued existence at the threshold constitutes a distinct pneumatological site. The difference is not merely emphasis but *order*: whereas Stanton begins with creation and moves to charism, a theology of youth *after Pentecost* begins with the Spirit's sovereign initiative (the charism already given) and then views the adolescent "shape" as the vessel that the Spirit's work inhabits. If Stanton provides the anthropological ground of human dignity, Pentecostal pneumatology provides the theological sky of prophetic destiny, defining the very atmosphere in which the reality of youth finds its fullest meaning and expression.

The pneumatological foundation of this claim rests on the "all flesh" mandate of Acts 2:17. The outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost is, by its own self-interpretation, a radically inclusive event: sons and daughters prophesy, young men see visions, old men dream dreams. Amos Yong (2005) has argued that this universal outpouring is not simply a statement about

demographic breadth but a theological claim about the nature of the Spirit's economy: the *Pneuma* refuses to ration gifts according to hierarchies of age, gender, or social position. The Spirit is the great equaliser of biological stages. To treat youth as permanently dependent on adult mediation of the Spirit, as those who receive the Spirit's influence only through adult mediation, is effectively quenching the Spirit's own declared intention.

This inclusivity is sharpened by Roger Stronstad's (1999) exegetical argument in *The Prophethood of All Believers*. Stronstad's Lukan scholarship demonstrates that the outpouring of Acts 2 is not merely the democratisation of spiritual experience but the inauguration of a universal prophetic vocation. Drawing on the Mosaic wish of Numbers 11:29 "Would that all the Lord's people were prophets" and its fulfilment in the Pentecost narrative, Stronstad argues that every Spirit-baptised believer receives the Spirit as a prophetic Spirit: the same Spirit that anointed and empowered the Old Testament prophets, the same Spirit that rested upon and drove the ministry of Jesus, is now poured out upon the entire covenant community without exception. The prophetic is not a specialised office distributed to a credentialed few; rather, it is a defining vocation of the whole people of God.

The implications of Stronstad's (1999) argument for a theology of youth are direct and demanding. If the prophetic Spirit is given to *all* flesh – and if the "sons and daughters" of Acts 2:17 are named explicitly and first – then the prophetic vocation of youth is not a metaphor or a developmental aspiration. It is a pneumatological reality established at Pentecost itself. Youth are not prophets-in-training awaiting the credential of adulthood; they are already full participants in the prophethood of all believers. Their prophetic voice may be unpolished, their prophetic perception partial, their prophetic courage intermittent (as it is for every believer at every stage

of life), but the Spirit who anoints them does not withhold the prophetic commission until they reach a prescribed level of maturity.

It is at this point that Stanton's (2021) distinction between *prophetic presence* and *prophetic voice* becomes a useful analytical framework. Stanton observes that youth as *prophetic presence* refers to what young people *are* – their ontological mode of existence as liminal, questioning, authentically human beings who embody and live out the central questions of existence in ways that prophetically challenge adult complacency. Youth as *prophetic voice*, by contrast, refers to what young people *actively contribute* – their capacity, grounded in their cultural location and unique perspectives, to speak words that the church and world need to hear. The Liminal Prophet category integrates and *radicalises both pneumatologically*. The young person is a prophetic *presence* not merely by virtue of their developmental characteristics but because the Spirit indwells their threshold existence, making their liminality itself a sacred location. They are a prophetic *voice* not merely because their cultural literacy gives them unique insight into ecclesial blind spots (although Stanton is right that it does) but because the Spirit who establishes the prophethood of all believers speaks through their groaning, questioning, and tinkering with faith.

Yong's pneumatological anthropology further provides the conceptual language for speaking of youth as *charism-bearers*. If the Spirit distributes gifts across the whole body for the common good (1 Corinthians 12), it then invites a narrative of youth identity framed not by deficit but by charism: the specific gifts of prophetic vision, creative imagination, frank questioning, and porous hospitality that the Spirit characteristically distributes to those who occupy the margins. This aligns with Yong's broader argument, developed most fully in his political theology (2010) and his Lukan readings (2011b), that the Spirit speaks *from the*

margins: that those who occupy the periphery of institutional power possess a prophetic clarity unavailable to those at the centre. The “many tongues” of Pentecost represent a challenge to every monolingual centre. Youth, as the age-marginalised of the ecclesial community, are not simply recipients of the Spirit's gifts; they, in a theologically precise sense, occupy a strategic location as one of the Spirit's preferred prophetic addresses. Stronstad establishes *what* the Spirit has already given young people after Pentecost (a full prophetic anointing, not a provisional or probationary one), while Yong explains *why* they occupy a prophetically privileged position (the Spirit's preferential address to and through the marginalised). Together, they close the door on any residual clericalism that would make the liminal prophet's voice conditional on institutional validation.

This argument is further deepened by Johns (1993) conception of Pentecostal spiritual formation as a “*religion of the groan*.” From this perspective, adolescent soul-searching is an embodied manifestation of the *stenagmos* (the “unutterable groanings” of Romans 8) not a phase to be cured or jettisoned but a prophetic disposition. The young person's search for identity, belonging, and meaning, mirrors the Spirit's own groaning within the *already* and *not yet* tension of creation. Thus, instability, longing, unfinishedness, liquidity, are not always signs of failure, but the very conditions and seeds of formation that is simultaneously individual, ecclesial and societal. Instead of hastily pathologising their liminality or silencing their groaning, a theology of youth after Pentecost teaches us to *inhabit* it as a school of hope, new creation, and divine vision. Ultimately, those pushed to the margins of an institution often possess a prophetic vantage point and clearer view of its failings *and* its future, typically unavailable to those at the centre; captured by the idiom 旁观者清 (*páng guān zhě qīng*): distance lends a clearer eye.

Nimi Wariboko's (2012; 2018) "Pentecostal Principle" of *perpetual beginning again* provides the final structural element of this ontology. Wariboko argues that the generative core of Pentecostalism is its Spirit-driven insistence on *radical openness*: the refusal to allow any institutional form, theological formulation, or cultural expression to calcify into a final product, projecting instead "the threatening image of a community with uncontrolled boundaries" (Wariboko, 2018:21). The Spirit's creativity is precisely its tendency to begin again, to break open what has become closed. The Pentecostal principle, as Wariboko (2012:44) states, "is the power of emergent creativity that disrupts social existence, generates infinite restlessness, and results in novelty." Youthhood, as a life stage defined by repeated beginnings, experimental self-construction, and the constant negotiation of identity, enacts this Pentecostal principle with uncanny embodied fidelity. If James K. A. Smith (2010) is right that "radical openness to God" is one of Pentecostalism's defining contributions, then youth – who inhabit radical openness as an existential condition – are not the church's most unstable members but among its most characteristically Pentecostal ones.

Understood in this light, the *Liminal Prophet* may be defined as *a young person whose Spirit-inhabited existence at the threshold between childhood and adulthood becomes a site of ecclesial critique, prophetic groaning, and imaginative re-beginning for the life of the church*. Their digital tinkering with inherited frameworks and their liquid faith (Choong 2026a, 2026b) are not symptoms of fragmentation, but modes of pneumatological adaptation to the conditions of liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000). The Liminal Prophet is not a rebel without a cause; they are the Spirit's provisional answer to a church that is always in danger of becoming a static monument rather than a living movement. The church that has ears to hear must listen to what the Spirit, through the voice of the youth, is saying to the Body.

3. *Broken Vessels: Refining the Ontology of a Liminal Prophet*

To propose a pneumatological ontology of youth is to enter a field of significant theological tension. The Liminal Prophet paradigm does not exist in a vacuum; it must be stress-tested against two pertinent anxieties of the modern church: the risk of *uncritical romanticism* and that of *juvenilization*.

The first objection is the charge of *romanticism*: that to speak of every teenager as a prophet indulges an uncritical idealisation of adolescence, ignoring the reality of sin, immaturity, and the need for accountability. The young person at the threshold is no purified spiritual vessel; they are a sinner, a sufferer, and a stumbler, and often all at once. However, the paradigm's response is not tactical retreat and qualification, but ontological deepening and clarification. Drawing on Dietrich Bonhoeffer's (1954) understanding of the *communio sanctorum* in *Life Together*, we observe that because Christ stands between every believer and every *other*, the young person's immaturity and sin does not disqualify them from being a site of divine address. The prophetic voice does not arise from the prophet's moral perfection – a cursory reading of the Hebrew prophetic literature dispels that notion immediately. It arises from their shared participation in the groaning Body of Christ. The liminal prophet is not a hero of spiritual purity (nor a disqualified sinner) but a Bonhoefferian brother and sister: claimed by Christ, indwelt by the Spirit, and therefore capable of bearing a word that the community needs to hear.

Here, Stanton's (2021) call for a more *integrated* framework also provides a necessary corrective. His model holds adolescent strengths alongside their weaknesses within a single theological vision, insisting that "we fall into error...when we shape a ministry among young people around one or two of these perspectives to the exclusion of others" (Stanton 2021:60).

The Liminal Prophet paradigm shares this integrative logic. To name youth as liminal prophets is not to ignore their “brokenness,” but to recognise that their Spirit-imbued existence encompasses both strength and struggle. The groaning of Romans 8 does not require the groaner to be free of sin or confusion. It requires only that they be honest before God. What is perceived as adolescent “weakness” and vulnerability, far from undermining the liminal prophet claim, is precisely what validates it; the young have not yet mastered the confident certainties of institutional faith that often pass for mature faith.

Stronstad's (1999) prophethood framework reinforces this response with exegetical precision. The Old Testament prophetic tradition is replete with prophets whose personal failings, institutional marginality, and social vulnerability were no obstacle to their prophetic commission. Jeremiah's youth and self-declared inadequacy (Jeremiah 1:6), Amos's non-professional status (Amos 7:14), and the consistent pattern of Spirit-anointing falling upon the overlooked and the unlikely all establish that prophetic vocation is constituted by the Spirit's initiative, not the prophet's credentials. To apply Stronstad's argument to youth is not to romanticise them; it is to take the biblical theology of prophethood seriously enough to follow it to its logical conclusion.

The second objection is more structural and comes most forcefully from Thomas Bergler's historical analysis of American Christianity. In *The Juvenilization of American Christianity* (2012) and its sequel (2014), Bergler warns that the uncritical adoption of adolescent emotional and cultural norms as the standard for Christian experience has produced a church incapable of demanding commitment or sustaining the difficult practices of mature discipleship. This is a legitimate warning, and while the paradigm of the Liminal Prophet accepts this warning, it rejects the conclusion that embracing youth as pneumatological agents and liminal

prophets must necessarily lead to the “juvenilization” of the church. A clear distinction must be made here: Bergler's critique targets a *practice failure* where a church descends to adolescent emotionalism as its permanent register. In contrast, the paradigm of the Liminal Prophet makes an *ontological claim* regarding the theological value of youthful liminality. We are not valorising “childish things” (1 Corinthians 13:11); the avoidance of commitment or a consumer posture toward faith. Rather, we identify youthful liminality as a distinctive pneumatological site with a prophetically disruptive and constructive function for the Body. Their charism is not in spite of their instability, on the contrary, it is often made visible *through* it.

Far from juvenilizing the church, this prophetic function operates constructively on three levels. At the macro-institutional level, young people serve as an ecological litmus test. A church that cannot (or does not) engage the unrefined questions of the young has likely fossilised into a monument. Stanton's (2021: 74) warning of youth as a “prophetic absence” is critical here: the departure of young people from the church, like the departure of frogs from an ecosystem, is a leading indicator of ecological disaster, not a problem with the frogs themselves. At the mezzo-communal level, young people serve as disruptors of religious clichés and entrenched church vernacular. By bringing unfiltered comments and contemporary struggles to the table, they enact what Stanton (2021: 68) identifies as the “prophetic voice”, challenging our families and small/cell group communities to re-verify our convictions and introspectively consider how we (dis)embody them. At the micro-formatational level, their daily tinkering with faith in digital and hybrid spaces proves that the Spirit is active within the unresolved groanings of ordinary life, not just within church programming. The liminal prophet does not provide a model for how adults should behave, they perform a prophetic function that prevents faith from becoming a finished

product. They remind the centre that in the economy of the Spirit, we are all perpetual pilgrims in the Upper Room.

V. Conclusion: Toward a Prophetic Partnership

The construction of a Theology of Youth After Pentecost is an urgent ecclesial necessity and must not be read as simply an academic exercise. By rescuing young people from the margins of functionalism and retention management, we reclaim a biblical vision where the Spirit is poured out on *pasa sarx* without exception. The paradigm of the Liminal Prophet invites the church to see the “betwixt and between” nature of adolescence not as a phase to be rushed through, but as a perpetual Upper Room: a sacred space of waiting, groaning, and transformative openness that keeps the Body of Christ from ossifying into a static monument. By leaning into this threshold space, the entire ecclesial community is kept alive, agile, and sensitively attuned to what the Spirit is speaking to the church today.

The urgency of this paradigm is felt with distinct acuteness across the Asian chapter of the global Pentecostal movement. In Singapore and across the region, rapid urbanisation, digital mediation, and social volatility intensify the conditions of youth liminality. Here, young people navigate identity, faith, and authority within a liquid-modern landscape that constantly fragments and reassembles the self. A theology of youth must therefore do more than preserve institutional continuity, it must learn to listen for the Spirit’s voice in the precise places where young people live, question, tinker, and pray.

Pentecostalism has historically drawn much of its vitality from the conviction that the Spirit moves at the edges, through the marginalised, the uncredentialed, and the socially peripheral. It would be a profound irony if a movement born from the Spirit's indiscriminate

outpouring were to become, in its urban Asian maturity, an institution that systematically marginalises the voice of the young. The liminal prophet stands as the Spirit's definitive safeguard against such domestication. A perpetual reminder, raised up from within the community's own life, that the church is a living Body, not a bureaucracy.

Rather than being framed as pastoral challenges, the liminality and instability of the young person must be received as vital gifts. They serve as a persistent reminder that Pentecostal life is never a finished product but is always being renewed by the Spirit. For a church that is itself called to live in the eschatological tension of the *already* and the *not yet*, the liminal prophet is not the least mature member of the community. They are, in fact, the ones who most honestly embody and remind the church of its own perpetual, holy becoming.

A Final Call: Youth as Theologians

As this paper concludes, I reprise the *cris de coeur* from last year's summit. We must move beyond a theology *about* young people toward a theology generated *by* young people. To acknowledge the prophetic voice of the adolescent is to admit that they are not merely the church's future, but its present theologians.

If we have the courage to listen, we will find that the Spirit is speaking through their questions, their tinkering, and their instability. A theology of youth *after Pentecost* mandates that we treat our sons and daughters not as unfinished projects, but as unpolished prophets to be heard. When academia and the church finally embrace this partnership, we will no longer see youth as a problem to be solved, but as the very gift that sustains the church as a living, breathing movement of the Spirit.

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