

# Stewardship Forum

## An evangelical alliance Partnership for Change

### Stewardship Tools for Individuals : Debt Counselling

**Title: Money Worries**

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#### **Introduction**

One of the best ways of reaching out into your community is to help those who are having financial difficulties. The reason for this is two - fold. Firstly, the need is enormous. There are indications that up to one in five adults in this country have some form of credit restriction imposed upon them. Over the past twenty years the amount of money owing on credit and store cards has increased from £4 billion to nearly £80 billion. The average debt on Credit Action's help - line is now approaching £30,000 a case and this figure is rising rapidly. Surveys indicate that couples argue more about money than anything else and Relate, the marriage guidance agency, have actually stated that money worries are the major cause of relationship breakdown in over 70% of cases.

Secondly, there is a wealth of teaching in the Bible about handling money sensibly. Indeed, it has been worked out that compared to about 500 verses on prayer and on faith, there are over 2350 on handling money. Sermons are not usually preached in the same ratio! By bringing the two together we can reach out into our community where so many are really hurting, bringing practical hope and often eternal hope as well. We can send out a message that we care and when we do people will ask why – and we can tell them!

#### **Bringing hope – a story of today**

Not long ago I was asked to do a week on GMTV speaking about debt. The very first day the number of our help-line was put up on the screen for no more than ten seconds. We had several thousand calls that day and things were so busy all we could do was to take names and numbers to ring people back unless they were cases that had to be dealt with immediately. Midway through the morning I spoke to a lady who was in deep distress and she told me that her husband had had a break - down, that they owed over £20,000 and were thinking of going bankrupt. I mentioned to her that there was a danger in that if it were possible she might inherit any money as it could go to creditors rather than to her. She replied by saying that there was no chance of that even though her father was wealthy, in that he had refused to speak to her since the day she had got married seventeen years before. Armed with her phone number I rang her father up, told him who I was and what I was doing on GMTV and of his daughter's plight. I gave him my home number in case he needed any further information. Thirty - six hours later my phone rang and as I picked it up this voice said " I want to thank you for reconciling me with my daughter. I have today sent a cheque to clear her debts and this weekend I am seeing a grand - daughter I didn't know I had. " He then asked why we did what we did and I explained that we were a Christian charity and simply wanted to reach out and help people in their need. At the end of this conversation he made a commitment to Christ. In today's society we need to show Jesus' love in action, putting people made in the image of Him ahead of our own self, and opportunities to speak about Him will then inevitably arrive.

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### **Some questions about debt to talk about**

In order to grasp the teaching about debt it would be good to talk about the following issues:

- **Why do you think the Bible says, “The borrower is slave of the lender” [Proverbs 22:7] and “You were bought at a price do not become slaves of men” [1 Corinthians 7:23]?**
- **Romans 13:8 also says, “Let no debt remain outstanding.”**

Given the above - discuss what it must feel like to be in debt and the emotions that it causes.

- **It would also be good to talk about the pressure that is put on us to “buy now and pay later” through advertising, mail shots etc.** How easy is it to be seduced by such offers even if you know you cannot really afford to repay them – especially if you are struggling to make ends meet.

Look at James 4:13 “Listen you who say “today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there and make money. Why you do not even know what will happen tomorrow.”” With very few jobs for life about, what risks are people taking on when they borrow extensively with the assumption that they will be able to repay out of future income?

### **The damage debt can do**

We have already seen the damage debt can do to families. Unlike many other things it also continually gets worse if nothing is done about it because of accruing interest often at rates of 30% or more. This constant pressure can make rational people do irrational things. It can also cause an enormous amount of stress, leading to time off work [thus often making the debt situation worse] and illness. Because one partner often does not tell the other about the full extent of the problem it usually leads to breakdown of trust and low self-esteem. People can become very lonely, sometimes even cutting themselves off from friends because they can't afford their round of drinks at the pub. Sadly, if help is not available it can lead to people even taking their own lives.

### **So what can be done?**

There is so much a church, or even a small group, can do to help those in their community. You might even start with your church notice board that people see every day as they walk past. What message does it relay to them? Why not show that you care by putting Credit Action's free-phone help-line number on it, as well as details of the nearest Citizens Advice Bureau, Relate and Samaritans numbers etc. You can send out a message to your community that you care and it costs you nothing. Of course, if your church has its own counsellors that too should be highlighted.

If, after discussion you believe that you would like to provide some form of debt counselling into your community, then Credit Action can come both to preach at your church to raise awareness of such issues and also provide basic training for you. This is always very useful as not only does it find more people who would like to be counsellors but also encourages those who would like to support financially or through prayer. Importantly too, it will also give

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hope to those who are in debt within your church. Sadly all figures indicate that this will be about the same percentage as in the rest of your community.

Even if you feel you cannot do that, there are ways that your group can reach out into your community. Credit Action has free posters and little cards promoting the help-line that are available free of charge. As well as putting them in the church think constructively of all the places in your community that you could put them – libraries, benefits offices etc. Perhaps the best place is in doctors' surgeries. An increasing number of these are also taking some of our Better Money Management series [which are secular booklets aimed at different groups in our society such as families, single parents, students etc.] because they see so many people with ailments caused by stress caused by money worries. We know of one surgery that gave away over three hundred copies in a year. In addition, these books also show how to do basic budgeting and it is the failure to know how to do this that is often the main reason why so many get into debt in the first place.

Credit Action, in conjunction with Family Matters, have also produced a course, Your Money Counts, that teaches basic money management skills and which is meant to be used in a community setting. Leaders' notes are also available so no-one needs to be a financial expert before leading the course!

### **Do some research in your area.**

Do you have a relatively high number of students, young people or single parents? If so get some of the guides. We are very happy to supply these at low cost and for your church to put its logo on the books before you distribute.

It might also be worth exploring setting up a credit union. This can take some time and requires a common bond [which could be as simple as all those who live in such and such area] before it can be established. Generally speaking they are a very good way of lending as interest rates tend to be lower than anywhere else and they thus can be very helpful to the poorer members of your communities who might otherwise have to borrow from high interest sources or even from loan sharks. Details of how to find out about credit unions can be found at the end of this chapter. If this is too big a project for you, you could still set up a hardship fund to help meet real emergencies that you become aware of or establish a community larder.

It is important that before rushing in to anything, you establish what is already happening in your community. Then decide whether you want to join with them in making that particular item more effective, or whether you want to reach out in a new area where you perceive gaps of need. Whatever you do, it does mean getting a clear feel of the breakdown of your community. Nothing beats getting to know people and giving them time. Taking people, who have no cars to places where they can shop cheaply, for example, could have all sorts of positive benefits.

### **Do's and Don'ts**

1. Do remember that money and debt are very sensitive subjects. Debt books that are put in shops may not sell but others that are put where they can be taken easily will probably vanish very quickly!

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2. Do remember that many in debt will not have told anyone else even their partners. So keep any knowledge you may gain strictly confidential.
3. Do be creative. The more widely you distribute books, posters etc, the more people will be helped.
4. Do not on any account try and do any debt counselling before being fully trained. Counsellors need to be licensed and also to have insurance.

Do not think this problem will go away. With the amount of debt in this country and the number of credit and store cards in issue [47 million in Britain compared to 3 million in Germany] this problem is sadly here to stay. So any projects you plan could be repeatable or for the long term.

### Resources

Credit Action has a wide range of materials that can help you. These include:

1. Free-phone debt help-line [0800 591084]. Posters and cards are also available advertising this free of charge.
2. A whole range of guides, both secular and Christian, that helps people get out of debt as well as preventing them getting into debt in the first place.
3. An outreach course, Your Money Counts, specially written to reach into local communities.
4. Speakers who can teach in either a church or secular setting on all aspects of money management. Our address is: Credit Action, 6 Regent Terrace, Cambridge CB2 1AA Telephone: 01223 324034
5. Association of British Credit Unions. Their address is: Hollyoak House, Hanover Street, Manchester M60 0AS Telephone: 0161 832 3694