

Charity warns: beware of holiday debt

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BRADFORD, England (ABP) — A Christian debt-counseling charity in the United Kingdom is calling on people to avoid using credit cards and loans to pay for their Christmas shopping this year.

Christians Against Poverty, a ministry that advocates poverty relief through debt counseling advice and practical help, warned Nov. 25 that poor Christmas shopping habits can burden families with significant debt.

Matt Barlow, the charity's chief executive officer, said tough economic times can tempt shoppers to rationalize "at least we'll have a great Christmas" and use that as an excuse to overspend. Bad habits and compulsive purchasing as part of Christmas shopping can burden families with significant debt, according to Christians Against Poverty, a ministry that advocates poverty relief through debt counseling advice and practical help. (RNS photo by Aaron Houston/The Star-Ledger)

"If you've already caught yourself saying this, we want your alarm bells to be ringing loud and clear," Barlow said in a [press release](#).

The charity's research has found that half of homes with out-of-control debt have at some time taken out a loan to cover the cost of Christmas. That's likely to get worse, Barlow said, as economic uncertainties continue into the New Year.

"We're not party poopers," he said. "We just want people to enjoy Christmas and not be anxious about whether they will be able to pay it all back."

CNBC has [reported](#) research finding that a record 43 percent of American shoppers plan to spend less for Christmas this year than they spent in 2009, compared to 11 percent who plan to spend more.

Christians Against Poverty suggested 10 ideas for avoiding holiday debt:

1. Decide what you have to spend. Make a list and be realistic. Paying in cash may help you keep control.

2. Manage expectations early. If things are tight don't be afraid to say so to family members. They are probably in the same boat.

3. Suggest that relatives pool expenses to buy children gifts they want instead of overindulging them individually.

4. Substitute expensive decorations with things like paper chains and cookies that add to the fun without costing much.

5. Never take out a Christmas loan. The consequences could be disastrous in terms of family debt.

6. Give vouchers for services like ironing or baby sitting instead of buying them. Homemade gifts like cookies and fudge show you've spent time and care.

7. Don't feel guilty if you can't afford the latest present for your children. You can't buy love, and it lasts longer in the memory than any toy.

8. Avoid the trap of reciprocal gift giving and buying out of obligation.

9. Don't overspend in the January sales, no matter how good a bargain you might see. Make a budget and stick with it. If possible leave the credit cards at home.

10. Enjoy low-cost entertainment like lights in town, family board games

and holiday programs at churches and schools.

Sam Brink, minister of church resources and mission support for American Baptist Churches of Wisconsin, [proposed](#) another checklist after the holiday season is over.

— "Was my Christmas experience one of good news for me and for those around me?"

— "Do I feel comfortable today with the amount of money that I/we spent over the Christmas holidays?"

— "What of myself did I give away this Christmas?"

— "Did I/we have a Christmas spending plan and did I/we stick to it?"

— "Did it really feel more blessed to give than to receive?"

— "What do I/we need to do this year to make sure [next] Christmas will be different?"

— "How did my/our church help me/us to celebrate Christmas in a financial healthy way?"

-Bob Allen is senior writer for Associated Baptist Press.