

8 Ways Your Church Can Help Folks Escape Debt Trap

There are more payday and title loan stores in Missouri than Starbucks, Wal-Marts and McDonalds combined.

I've heard this statement more times than I can recall.

It has been a wake-up call for me in terms of understanding the gravity of the predatory loan problem in the Show Me State.

The nature and extent of this toxic influence upon communities varies from state to state.

Still, we cannot allow 450 percent interest rates and unchecked fees to go unchallenged. There are too many people whose lives have been wrecked by this unending cycle of debt.

For about a year now, our church has become directly involved in helping people escape "the debt trap" created by payday and title loan companies.

The result of our efforts has been the creation of University Hope, a ministry given oversight through volunteers and mentors.

Our church provides funds for persons who pay off their high interest payday or title loans. We do so in partnership with the credit union directly across the street from our facility.

We have established an account at the credit union with monies received from individuals in our church along with contributions through our deacon benevolence fund.

Persons come to us for an initial interview. If these persons qualify for assistance,

they are escorted to the credit union who generates the loan.

Thus far, we have helped 35 individuals and families. It has been a rewarding and eye-opening experience.

Our church has garnered attention for our efforts both in the local area and broader Cooperative Baptist Fellowship community. I've done several interviews with local media who want to know "why" we are involved in this issue.

Although it's easy to treat payday and title loans as an "issue," what I have found is that it is more relational than that.

When we think about the people who are harmed through this industry, it should motivate us to offer not only our words but also our actions.

One of the first casualties of this unending cycle of debt is the dignity of the person. Many people lose hope of ever getting out of this kind of debt.

Some wrestle with tremendous shame that they secured a payday or title loan in the first place.

That's where faith communities can come in. I've gained a greater appreciation for what churches can do in enacting positive change.

Hopefully, some of these suggestions will be useful for pastors and other faith leaders:

1. Get educated about the problem.

Find out the size and scope of the payday and title loan industry's influence in your state and community. There are a number of online resources that document the toxic impact of this business.

2. Advocacy is a good start.

Pastors and faith leaders can have great influence by raising awareness about the

detrimental nature of the payday and title loan industry.

While churches can provide relief to some individuals in “the debt trap,” the size and scope of the problem requires legislation at the state level. Find out where your state stands with capping the interest rates on payday and title loans.

3. Seek out others who share this interest.

There are numerous organizations (like Faith Voices, Stop the Debt Trap) who are already involved. The CBF also has an advocacy team who can be helpful. Working with others on a common goal can create and raise more awareness and have more impact.

4. Talk about it with your leadership.

Let others know that this has become an important issue for you. There may be others who feel the same way and would be open to having the church take on a more direct role in helping your local community.

5. Realize that this is a justice issue rather than a political one.

It’s about fairness. There are numerous biblical passages that talk about how to treat the poor and underprivileged and not to take advantage of them.

6. Preach and teach about it.

Our church’s involvement began with a sermon from Luke 4 about “preaching good news to the poor.” Others in our church embraced that challenge and became leaders in our current University Hope ministry.

7. Pray about it.

We shouldn’t have to pray about caring for the poor and fighting for justice; that’s part of the gospel. However, you may need to pray about how your own church should get involved in the payday and title loan issue.

8. Talk to churches who are already doing this.

It will help you and your church a great deal to realize that there are faith groups directly involved. You might be able to adopt or adapt a model that is already in use.

It has been especially rewarding to see other congregations see the value and benefit of engaging our culture through payday and title loan debt relief. My hope is that other faith groups will realize the importance of this effort.

Too many issues divide the faith community. Surely, we can come together and agree that exploiting the poor is not consistent with the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. He came to “bring good news to the poor” (Luke 4:16-21).

Let this be our desire as well.

✘ [Danny Chisholm](#) is senior pastor of University Heights Baptist Church in Springfield, Missouri. His writings also appear on his [blog](#), and you can follow him on Twitter [@ChisholmDanny](#).

Editor’s note: This article is part of a series of articles focused on predatory lending practices within the payday loan industry. The previous article in the series is:

[*Faith Community Fights for Payday Lending Reform*](#)