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Advice UK, a charitable umbrella group supporting community organisations that give free advice to members of the public, has parted company with one of its members after it discovered it offered prayers along with debt advice.

Christians Against Poverty was told that its membership of Advice UK was incompatible with the constitution that states that advice should be impartial and offered with no strings attached.

Advice UK chief executive Steve Johnson denied any discrimination against religious groups, saying plenty of other faith groups were members. He said Advice UK raised the issue with Christians Against Poverty after receiving reports, from both beneficiaries and other advice groups, about the offers of prayer. The discussion was perfectly amicable but at the end CAP chose to withdraw from membership, he said. “The people at CAP feel it is important to offer prayer and we absolutely respect their view, but we don’t agree with it. Praying is not advice. We don’t feel it is compatible with what is regarded throughout the advice sector as normal practice.”

Christians Against Poverty is a national charity with a network of 160 centres based in local churches. Advice UK is the UK’s largest support network for free, independent advice centres.

AdviceUK’s Johnson said there was no evidence that CAP was evangelising to clients or trying to convert them to Christianity “but it is not a big step from one to the other and that would be a concern”.

People in debt often don’t seek help until their situation becomes desperate and so are often feeling very vulnerable and hugely thankful for the lifeline provided by counsellors, he said. Thus the offer of prayer could pose a dilemma or unwanted pressure for some.

Christians Against Poverty said in a statement: “Whilst CAP is committed to provide impartial help and advice to all members of society, as an expression of our care for clients we do offer to pray with people. We also have the furtherance of the Christian faith as a charitable objective. In order to protect the integrity of both organisations it was amicably agreed that CAP would not continue to be an Advice UK member.”

Keith Porteous Wood, Executive Director of the National Secular Society, said: “This is only a minor skirmish compared to what can be expected when faith-based welfare becomes more established. When many social services that were previously secular become church, temple or mosque-based, the pressure will increase for service users to pray and express religion before they can access those services. Reassurances about it being optional and there not being any pressure are unconvincing. In this case, the clue comes with the ‘furtherance of the Christian faith’ as a charitable objective, coupled with the disinclination to cease offering prayer with its debt advice. Once you’re inside a church and desperate for the service being provided, most people in this situation will feel they have to do whatever they are required to, even if it is against their

conscience.”