

... on government officials' cars



... weekend, attack a government official's car at the interior ministry in Bangkok yesterday. The car of
... after he announced a state of emergency. Mr Abhisit escaped but his car was severely damaged. E
... Early
... protesters blocking a key intersection in Bangkok **Report, Page 5** Reuters

People turn to religion over debt worries

By Vivienne Raper

Britons are turning from Mammon to religion as the downturn bites – for advice about debt and redundancy, not simply spiritual consolation.

The growing demand for financial and legal advice from places of worship is prompting many to launch a new type of service.

At Regent's Park Mosque in London, one of the UK's biggest Islamic cultural centres, demand for free legal advice rose three-fold as the downturn took hold, according to Adnan Mahmood, a solicitor who, until recently, gave his services there pro bono.

Abdullah Abdou, the centre's education officer and librarian, said there had been a noticeable increase in the numbers applying for *zakat*, a system of tithes similar to "alms for the poor".

The Church of England and synagogues, meanwhile, have responded to hard times by launching projects to help indebted community members.

Among them is a "credit crunch network" of experts, including lawyers and employment specialists, brought together by Yitzchak Schochet, rabbi of the Mill Hill Synagogue in London, to provide free advice to Jewish community members.

Christian debt counselling charities, including Christians Against Poverty, met Anglican clergy last month for a workshop on supporting people in debt.

"We were alarmed by the number of referrals," said Jack Maple, community ministry adviser for the Diocese of London. "Apparently Christians Against Poverty have 3,500 new referrals every day."

The charities offer training to parishes and can provide advice and practical support, such as negotiating with creditors.

One Anglican project recently launched is the Money Advice Centre, a not-for-profit advisory service, at St Paul's Church in Shadwell, London. Since October, eight volunteers have been trained to give financial advice.

Additional reporting by Sujata Das

N Sea oil search

... are critical to any oil
... long-term supply pros-
... But they are particularly
... important for the North Sea,
... ageing fields' production
... rapidly declining.

The UK and Europe will
... increasingly have to rely on Rus-
... for natural gas and the Mid-
... East for oil.

The worsening exploration cli-
... could knock 10-15 years off
... the North Sea's expected lifespan
... of 20-30 years, meaning almost
... half of all its infrastructure could
... be decommissioned within the
... next 11 years, UK Oil and Gas
... estimates.

Instead of satisfying 45 per cent
... of the UK's oil and gas needs in
... 2020, at the current investment
... the North Sea would only be

able to meet 12 per cent of its
... demand.

Oil prices have plummeted
... from \$147 a barrel in July 2008 to
... about \$50 today.

The North Sea's situation is
... significantly worse than else-
... where because new discoveries
... tend to be smaller and rarer and
... old fields are becoming less pro-
... ductive and more expensive to
... maintain.

Analysts at Barclays Capital
... expect spending on global explora-
... tion and production to fall by
... only 12 per cent in 2009.

Companies – and the banks
... that fund them – are reluctant to
... explore the North Sea because oil
... prices at or about \$50 a barrel
... make developing a new field,
... especially one that requires a lot

of new infrastructure, a risky, if
... not foolhardy, venture.

The industry forecasts further
... consolidation but fears it could
... lose as many as 50,000 of its
... 400,000 jobs in the next two
... years.

The fall in exploration activity
... is so bad that the Department of
... Energy has had to postpone its
... offshore licensing round and the
... Treasury has indicated that it
... would give companies some tax
... relief in the Budget this month.

From 2010, the government is
... likely to suffer a significant drop
... in tax revenues because oil com-
... panies, together with banks,
... have been its most important
... sources of funding.