

THE TRUE STORY of LIFE IN BLACKBURN

Many of you reading this will have seen the Panorama programme - 'White Fright: Divided Britain' aired on 22nd January 2018, which focussed on Blackburn to find a divided community. Their agenda, was to visit Blackburn ten years on, to show that it is still a divided town...

Well, I have to say that nothing could be further from the truth. I'm now in my fourth year as Church Related Community Work Minister (CRCWM) based with three churches in North and East Blackburn and that is not my experience, certainly not in the way the producers claimed it to be. I believe that the majority of people in Blackburn are disturbed by the way in which the programme was contrived, divisive and unrepresentative of all the hard work taking place in solving the issues of a community, which is no more divided than any other major town or city with a high ethnic population.

In this reflection, I wish to share some of the positive work that is taking place and the achievements which have been made.

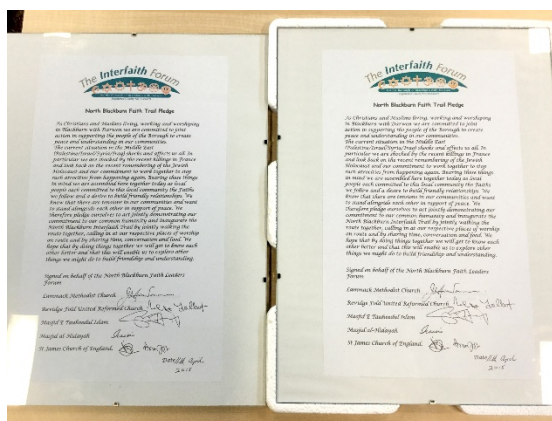
Two of the three churches I'm based with are situated in areas with high Asian populations and are working very closely with the local Mosques and other places of worship to forge closer links and breakdown misunderstandings and suspicions, which inevitably do exist but this doesn't constitute 'divided communities'.

Together we have held events which have seen people coming together to share food, explore each other's cultures and discover ways in which we can work together. Revidge Fold URC were instrumental in developing a North Blackburn inter-faith trail, which produced a resource to enable individuals, groups and schools to be able to visit all the worship centres in the area to discover each other's culture and explore why we do what we do and the way we do it. At the launch of the trail, a covenant was signed by all the church leaders and since then a faith leaders' forum has been formed, which has organised other events including a *faith, food and friendship* event, which was attended by approximately 60 adults and young people.



Westbury Gardens URC have also been working with all the worship centres in East Blackburn and have been involved in a similar event and sharing in the breaking of the fast during Ramadan.

All this work is supported by the very strong Blackburn with Darwen Interfaith forum, which is made up of all six of the world faiths. This group also arrange visits to local schools of all ages to share their faith and answer pupils' questions, sometimes very difficult questions, as well as arrange school visits to worship centres. These visits are enjoyed by the children and young people and are very positive ways in helping to understand our differences in culture and practice.



Derek Estill (General Assembly Moderator elect 2018-20) is a pivotal member of the Interfaith Forum and had this to say in a response to the BBC programme:

“The Blackburn with Darwen Interfaith Forum is active and successful at running work programmes across the community to help break down barriers, build bridges and help people from all sections of our community cross over them. Through working together in partnership with others across the town, and wider afield, there is a growing awareness of the need to be a community that celebrates and embraces difference and helps those who feel anxious to form friendships and a sense of belonging.

Whilst all communities have tensions we believe our community is strong and more resilient than most and feel strongly that this should have been prominently featured in the programme to give the right balance.”



There is a lot of great work going on with refugees and asylum seekers and those who have been granted asylum both via churches and other agencies. One of our URC Churches, Central URC in Darwen on the outskirts of Blackburn hold a weekly drop-in: DARE (Darwen Asylum & Refugee Enterprise) which assists those seeking asylum to learn English, find accommodation, fill in applications and give other assistance as required, including support at hearings.

John East is an Elder at Central (and a retired community worker and local councillor) who is heavily involved with this project and other work through Blackburn YMCA (of which I'm a committee member) and had this to say, as part of his response to the BBC:

"Poor investigation and research - the producer and director need re-training in factual reporting and [this] certainly sends the wrong message of a community trying its best to determine its destiny. As a local white resident born in the Blackburn area - I would have welcomed the opportunity to place the reality of what is going on. Instead, a very contrived programme that fans the flames of racism and 'non-British' values.

I work tirelessly to welcome the stranger and immigrant in a town with a track record of hospitality, tolerance and care. Your programme undermines the tremendous work to bring all communities together."

The YMCA is taking the lead on Blackburn with Darwen becoming a city/town of sanctuary, which will be launched on 19th April and I am privileged to be involved in this project as part of my Ministry.

None of this work was reported in the programme, why? because it's **good news!**

Blackburn is a great place to live and work and in my opinion and many others the programme was a deliberate exercise in scaremongering, by people who have no idea of life in Blackburn.

'Jesus welcomed the stranger and as His Disciples - that's what we should do also in whatever way we can which are appropriate to the Faith we follow'.

We await to see if the BBC do a follow up programme which tells the true story of life in Blackburn.

Watch this space.

Mal Breeze,
Church related community work minister,
Revidge Fold, Trinity Brownhill and Westbury Gardens United Reformed Churches
North and East Blackburn Pastorate.