

When I returned to Lancashire earlier this year I was asked by many people: 'What's it like coming back?'

Some things seem reassuringly familiar – confusing roadworks around Blackburn town centre, sudden falls of snow that bring everything to a halt, the beauty of the Ribble Valley on the doorstep. Other things have changed – regular trains to Clitheroe, a bright new indoor market in Blackburn, several new mosques and a huge extension to the cathedral about to open.

And what's changed in the spiritual life of Blackburn? When I was last in East Lancs, Muslim friends were worrying about just the same issue as my Christian friends – how to pass on their faith to their children. Then they worried about children getting 'westernised' and unruly; these days anxieties seem to be not so much around young people becoming secularised as becoming 'too religious'; lured into a warped view of Islam.

The other week I visited a Muslim school and was impressed to see a bright display about 'British values'. Wondering what these might be, I looked more closely and discovered four: democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect. Later in the visit I had the chance to talk to a group of keen young students who wanted to know about my own discipline of prayer and reading Scripture. I was able to tell them that I have read the Qur'an and learned to respect their faith, and to encourage each of them to read the Bible for themselves, so that they can understand and respect the faith of their Christian friends.

Recently I also visited St. Stephen's Church in Little Harwood, and to learn much from their vicar, the Revd Arun John. His own Asian heritage and deep understanding of other faiths has helped the Christian community there make friends with their Muslim neighbours and listen to each other's stories of faith.

From what I have seen over the last few months, I am more hopeful about the religious life of Blackburn than I was when I left 18 years ago. Christians and Muslims have very different beliefs about God, but the more we engage with one another the stronger our community will be.

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