SUNDAY TIMES

The major political event of 2014 was undoubtedly the Independence Referendum. Churches and faith groups wisely remained neutral. But the Referendum wasn't just about where we belong. It was also about what kind of community we are and wish to become. Sadly that second level of debate got rather lost. But the 'what kind of society' question continues to be important - and it is a debate to which churches and faith groups can contribute because it is more about values than politics.

If I had to choose two issues which are important as 'what kind of community' issues, I would unhesitatingly choose poverty as the first. The second would be about community. It's our share in what is a world challenge - to create community in the midst of diversity.

The Trussel Trust reports that in 2013-4, no fewer than 71428 people in Scotland received help from Food Banks. That is a scandal. We are a wealthy country and 'poverty in the midst of plenty' is unacceptable. Anybody who thinks strategically about the future of Scotland must see the ending of poverty as a major priority. Quite suddenly the aspiration to bring an end to poverty – particularly to child poverty – seems to have been sacrificed to other assumptions about how fiscal discipline can be re-established and public debt reduced. Pain is not shared – simply directed toward those who seem to have least ability to defend themselves. And the Food Banks tell a story of the impact of unemployment, of in-work poverty and of the squeeze on welfare benefits.

Faith communities have of course been deeply involved in the development of Food Banks. – and have been ready to respond to real need in this way. Many of the issues which challenge our society are complex and multi-layered. People like to contribute in some practical way. But it's hard to know how. So Food Banks provide a very direct way of helping people who are in real need. They get a wide range of people from many backgrounds working together. In that sense, Food Banks are a 'win-win'.

But of course it's not as simple as that. Nobody wants Food Banks to become part of the infrastructure of our society in the long term. Indeed we should be concerned that, by their very existence, they allow unacceptable levels of poverty to continue

The question of poverty needs to be addressed in many places. Most obviously it is for our politicians. But it challenges us in the faith communities. The Bible is uncompromising about the complacency which is bred by wealth and demands a 'bias to the poor'. I have heard too much of 'bias to the rich. Comments like, ‘These people don’t know how to cook’ simply scapegoat and degrade people whose plight should be a matter of deep concern to all of us. I hope that our reinvigorated Scottish democracy will rise above the politics of narrow financial self-interest.

Turning to the question of community - The tragedy in Glasgow just before Christmas drew forth from the people of the city a remarkable demonstration of community. The First Minister recounted how, faced with a horrific scene of devastation, people ran towards it rather than turning away, The days that followed showed that, however individualistic we become, community solidarity can be a tangible reality in Scotland today We also saw that, however secular our society seems to become, the religious instincts of our people are just below the surface. People turn back to faith as a way of attempting to find meaning in the midst of dreadful tragedy.

It seems to me that, not just in Scotland, but across the world in 2015 and beyond questions of how community can give meaning and value to people's lives are becoming ever more important. And at the 'sharp end' of that question is the challenge of diversity.

The scenes which we see on our TV's - particularly the appalling acts of militant Islamic groups like Isis - may stir in us an instinct to pull up our metaphorical drawbridges and seek the safety of an imagined uniformity. But I believe in diversity as one of the building blocks in a society which has real value. I believe that it is a faith value. One of the great privileges of my life and work is to be in relationship with some of Scotland's minority communities. Our inter-faith work provides the means by which that diversity can be expressed for the good of our whole community. I believe that it is for the good of all of us.

Scotland is a very special place. It's big enough to offer real diversity and a great resource of skills and talents of all kinds. But it's small enough to be a special and distinctive place with a sense of its own strengths and possibilities. We all have a part to play in that developing story.