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Keeping peace in Northern Ireland

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NCR Today

In 1999, I began 10 years as an international observer in Northern Ireland during those first two weeks of July, when Loyalists celebrate the country's membership in the United Kingdom and when Orangemen march to commemorate the victory of William of Orange almost 400 years ago. I stood on street corner flashpoints, taking photos, writing notes about the parades, the bonfires, the marching routes, and the behavior of the Protestants who marched and the Catholics who watched.

In the course of those 10 years, an uneasy peace broke out. We observers did our small part. People behaved better because we were there. The police did their job better because we were watching. The Parade Commission spoke more publicly about their deliberations because we asked questions.

The observers were housed in Catholic neighborhoods because the Protestant/Loyalist communities couldn't guarantee our safety. That led one of the IRA men to joke that the Republicans had to behave because these observers were crawling all over the place. And indeed, that was true.

The handshake between Martin McGuinness and Queen Elizabeth last month is a promise to the world that communities can reject war and violence. Everyone, including the queen, lost loved ones in the course of what outsiders quaintly call "the troubles." The people I knew just named bloody shootings. Everyone experienced cruel injustice. But finally everyone wanted peace. They wanted peace badly enough to make peace and create a more just society.

The Orangemen will march, proclaiming part of their history and culture. The Catholics will watch, perhaps still with some resentment. But neither side will throw bombs or shoot at each other. Then they will all go back to work, with the better schools and higher employment rates that peace brings.

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