

IIMC Study Abroad Program - A Reflection

Editor's Note: Torchie Corey, CMC, City of Snohomish, WA, composed this article. In the October issue, we will publish a comprehensive article comparing US and UK local government from one of our 2009 Study Abroad Program participants.

Last October 19 IIMC members and guests had the opportunity to participate in a study-abroad program to the United Kingdom, culminating in attendance at the UK's Society of Local Council Clerks conference in Coventry, England. There were representatives from eight US states, one Canadian province, one from the Netherlands and the country of South Africa.

Through the SLCC, we had the honor of meeting with City dignitaries, clerks and staff, seeing facilities not typically open to tourists. Comparing responsibilities of our entities to theirs was enlightening. At the University of Gloucestershire, Elisabeth Skinner spoke to us on "The State We're In: Parish and Town Councils in England 2007." As the difference in our cultures was revealed, so was the realization that we all share many of the same challenges, including: perceptions of government, budgets, personnel, and the division between various layers of government.

One of the differences noted was the ceremonial duties of the Mayor or Chairman. That person is selected by their council or board to serve as the 'public face' of the jurisdiction, setting aside their political views for one year and representing their city or county in social situations. The City of York provides a house in the center of town for the Mayor's residence while holding the position. The people we met in these roles were well-suited to the office. The Somerset County Chairman had an individual welcoming comment for each of us, based on where we came from. The Lord Mayor of Chester put on his full regalia and displayed the symbols of his office, posing for countless pictures and answering our questions.

We all had a deep appreciation for the history around us, seeing structures that were hundreds, even thousands, of years old: Stonehenge, the Roman Baths, Westminster and York Abbeys, and the Tower of London. Seeing the childhood home of Anne Hathaway, Shakespeare's wife, with its thatched roof and whitewashed walls, was like being in a Thomas Kincaid painting. We stayed at the Hotel de la Bere in Cheltenham, which began as a 15th century Tudor manor house. The dining area of the conference hotel was originally a manor house built in 1894. In Coventry we saw the ruins of the 14th century St. Michael's Cathedral, destroyed in World War II. Those were contrasted with Coventry Cathedral, built after the war and one of the world's most modern cathedrals, and the London Eye, constructed as part of Y2K to provide a panorama of the city.

During the SLCC conference, some of our delegates were speakers at one of the sessions. Those speakers were great representatives of IIMC. The majority of the audience seemed to be in awe of the amount of our entities' budgets. It was eye-opening for us to hear that one clerk could serve several villages and towns, prorated by so many hours per week or month.

Bringing 19 people from Africa, America, the Netherlands and Canada together for nine days was another special benefit of the program. We learned so much from each other. Tami Kelly's (MMC, Clerk of the Council, Grove City, Ohio) leadership of the group was impressive. The only warning for anyone considering participating in future programs is that it is difficult to say goodbye to all the wonderful people you will meet. We sincerely thank IIMC and SLCC for this great opportunity.