

“N. Ireland politicians visit church, tour Clinton library”

By Kayla Carrick
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On their way Sunday from West Memphis to Little Rock, seven visitors from Northern Ireland took a detour for an out-of-the-ordinary experience.

The group, all young politicians on an exchange program organized by the American Council of Young Political Leaders, stopped in Earle, about 20 miles outside West Memphis, and attended services at First Baptist Church.

State Rep. Denny Sumpter, D-West Memphis, is host for the group during their time in Arkansas. He suggested the detour to the church, where fellow Rep. Otis Davis, D-Earle, serves as pastor.

The congregation of First Baptist Church in Earle is predominately black, as is the population of Earle.

After arriving in Little Rock, Mark Cosgrove, a member of the Carrickfergus District Council, recounted the “enthusiastic” church service.

“We’d seen images on television shows and in films, but to be there and to see it was truly inspirational,” Cosgrove said.

Sumpter and several members of the delegation said it was important for the group to visit Arkansas and experience the crosscultural encounters such as the church service.

The American Council of Young Political Leaders is a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit educational organization that works to foster relations between the next generation of political leaders in the United States and their counterparts around the world.

As part of the 12-day exchange program, the group from Northern Ireland also will visit Bentonville and Fayetteville.

Before leaving Little Rock, the group plans to tour the state Capitol and the Central High School museum. On Sunday, they visited the Clinton Presidential Center.

Desmond Ward, a member of the Banbridge District Council in Northern Ireland, said he appreciated exploring American cities besides Washington, D.C., saying Washington is “like a big city in any country.”

“You really don’t see America until you get inside,” he said. “When you see Memphis and Arkansas, you really get to see the cultural differences.”

With the trip, the American Council of Young Political Leaders is furthering its mission to bring together political leaders from countries that have experienced bitter conflict. This group is the first delegation to visit the United States from Northern Ireland since the restoration of local governance in May and the reconstitution of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Sumpter said former President Clinton worked to quell the religious and political turmoil in Northern Ireland, and made several trips to Northern Ireland during his time in office. Because of that connection, Sumpter said it was important that the group visit the Clinton library.

“It’s something they could identify with,” Sumpter said.

Cosgrove said that during the trip, he plans to examine the cultural and political differences between the United States and his home, but that despite the differences, such as the way people worship at church services, he was struck by the similarities.

“It’s remarkable how some issues in Ireland and the rest of the U.K. are happening here, too,” Cosgrove said. “Ultimately, the resolution of those issues are the same.”

The other members of the group are Judith Cochrane, a member of the Castlereagh Borough Council; Richard Cushnie, First Secretary of the British Embassy at Dublin; Michelle McIlveen, a member of Northern Ireland Assembly for Strangford; Martin Reilly, a member of the Derry City Council; and Hugh Widdis, legal adviser for the Northern Ireland Assembly.