

Three sent to prison for torching churches

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By Verna Gates

BIRMINGHAM, Alabama (Reuters) - Three young men were sentenced on Monday to serve prison terms and pay more than \$3 million in restitution for burning down rural Alabama churches during a booze-fueled arson spree that terrified parishioners.

The three pleaded guilty in December to conspiracy and arson charges for setting the February 2006 fires that destroyed or damaged nine Baptist churches and injured two firefighters.

Matthew Lee Cloyd, 21, and Benjamin Moseley, 20, who admitted burning nine churches, were each sentenced to eight years and 11 months in prison. Russell Debusk, 20, who took part in five attacks, was sentenced to seven years in prison.

Each was ordered to pay a share of the \$3.1 million restitution, undergo treatment for alcohol abuse and perform 300 hours of community service while serving five years of probation, preferably helping the communities they harmed.

"You harmed a lot of people, with God's grace, you can help them heal," said U.S. District Judge David Proctor.

The trio, who were college students at the time, consumed "substantial amounts of alcohol" and set out to illegally hunt deer but torched five churches instead, according to a statement DeBusk read in court.

A witness had previously quoted Cloyd as saying it was done "as a joke, and it got out of hand."

Four nights later, Cloyd and Moseley burned four more churches in a different part of the state to divert law enforcement.

Frightened worshipers armed themselves and mounted round-the-clock vigils to guard their churches, while the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives made solving the crime its top national priority. Investigators arrested the trio after tracing a tire track at one of the churches to Cloyd's car.

All three defendants apologized in court.

"My actions took meaningful places from innocent people. Please accept my deepest apologies," Debusk said.

The young men were described in letters of support to the judge as kind generous, bright, good-hearted and compassionate. Moseley had formerly participated in missions where churches were built.

"Justice was served," said Rev. Jim Parker, pastor at Ashby Baptist Church, which was burned to the ground. His letter urging compassion was read to the courtroom.

Moseley's defense attorney, Bill Clark, called the sentence too harsh.

"We punish people more than anywhere else in the world and yet we are supposed to be a Christian nation," Clark said.

The three defendants are scheduled to go before state authorities on Thursday with an appeal to be sentenced as youthful offenders on additional charges pending in the state court. Bibb County District Attorney Michael Jackson insisted they serve time in state custody after serving their federal prison terms.

"I am not bending on that. We can pray for them while they are in prison," said Jackson.

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