

Alabama church arsonists get state prison time

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By Verna Gates

BIRMINGHAM, Alabama (Reuters) - Three young men who torched Alabama churches in a drunken spree last year must spend two years in state prison after completing their federal prison sentences, a judge ruled on Thursday.

Matthew Cloyd, 21, Benjamin Moseley, 20, and Russell DeBusk, 20, pleaded guilty to state charges before Bibb County Circuit Judge Marvin Wiggins.

Under a plea agreement, their 15-year sentences for arson, burglary and animal cruelty, for shooting a cow during the rampage, were reduced to two years as long as they behave.

"They'll be in there long enough to know it was a serious crime," said Bibb County District Attorney Michael Jackson.

The nine church fires in February 2006 started as a drunken prank and turned into a statewide nightmare as people mounted armed vigils to protect their houses of worship.

The incident evoked the days when the Ku Klux Klan and Satanists burned down churches.

Earlier this week, Cloyd and Moseley, who burned all nine churches, were sentenced to eight years in federal prison. DeBusk, who burned five churches, was sentenced to seven years in federal prison.

Dozens of parishioners crowded the courtroom for Thursday's hearing. Many of their preachers had called for mercy.

The Rev. Jim Parker, pastor of the ruined Ashby Baptist Church, had urged the state to keep the sentences light so the men could get out, start working and pay restitution.

"We prayed for wisdom for the judge, strength for the young men and grace for the families and I believe we saw the prayer answered today," said Parker.

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