

Alabama church fire suspects to remain in jail



By Verna Gates

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Three U.S. college students accused of burning nine churches in Alabama chose on Thursday to reject posting a bond and to remain in jail because they could have been rearrested on state charges, prosecutors said.

Magistrate Judge Robert Armstrong agreed to release Matthew Cloyd, 20, and Benjamin Moseley and Russell DeBusk, both 19, into the custody of their parents with ankle monitors and a \$50,000 bond, but their lawyers said they decided to remain in jail.

Michael Jackson, the district attorney for Bibb County, Alabama, where five churches were torched, said if the trio had chosen to accept the bond on the federal charges, he would have had them rearrested on state charges and subject to a bond of \$5 million instead -- \$1 million per Bibb County church.

"If the Feds let them go, we'll send them to prison. I've sent a lot of people off and burning churches is one of the worst things you can do," said Jackson.

The state arson charges that Jackson planned to file carry penalties of two to 20 years in prison for each church fire, and include five counts of third-degree burglary for breaking in to commit a crime. The burglary charges carry sentences of a year and a day to 10 years per church.

"They need to be punished for a long time," said Jackson.

The federal arson charges would mean a total of from seven to 40 years in prison for the suspects, if convicted.

Defense attorney Tommy Spina, the lawyer for Cloyd, said his client wanted to see the state charges before posting a bond.

"And there is a part of Matthew that does not want to be an additional burden to his parents," said Spina.

In court documents, a federal agent quoted Moseley as saying the three had gone to Bibb County to shoot deer on February 2 and had set fire to five rural churches early the next morning. A witness quoted Cloyd as saying that was done "as a joke, and it got out of hand."

The suspects are then accused of setting fire to four more churches in a bid to set federal investigators off track.

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