

Job description: Birmingham-Southern students burned churches as a "joke"

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Birmingham-Southern College has long prided itself on the actions of students who have gone all over the world—and as far away as Mother Teresa’s mission in Calcutta—to perform good deeds as part of the college’s social-service emphasis.

Now the United Methodist-related school in Alabama is dealing with the aftermath of an episode in which students have been accused of burning churches. “I can’t imagine that there won’t be a discussion of its implications, and self-reflection,” said college president David Pollick.

Federal agents ended an exhaustive investigation into arsons at nine Baptist churches in Alabama by arresting two Birmingham-Southern students and a University of Alabama-Birmingham student who had transferred from BSC.

Ben Moseley, 19, and Russell DeBusk, 19, were arrested at BSC early on March 8. UAB student Matthew Cloyd, 20, was arrested at his apartment later that day.

Pollick said March 9 that the college has pledged to help the burned churches rebuild, but not because the college feels responsible for the actions of its students. “There’s nothing to repent,” Pollick said. “We’re clearly in the limelight because they are our students.”

Pollick said his staff will be contacting each of the churches to determine whether “they want help—money or physical assistance. They have to be able to tell us what it is that will help them the most. We will move to do that.”

Duane Schliep, pastor of Rehobeth Baptist Church in Bibb County, which burned to the ground February 3, said the responsibility rests solely with the arsonists. “You couldn’t hold the school responsible for the acts of these three people,” Schliep said.

Moseley admitted to federal agents March 7 that he, Cloyd and DeBusk went to Bibb County in Cloyd's green Toyota 4Runner and set fire to five churches, according to an affidavit filed in Birmingham's federal court.

An unnamed witness quoted Cloyd as saying Moseley "did it as a joke, and it got out of hand," according to the affidavit signed by a federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives agent. Moseley told agents that he and Cloyd went to west Alabama and burned four more churches in an attempt to throw off investigators.

The college released a statement calling the students' misdeeds "cruel and senseless acts of destruction." The students have been suspended and were immediately banned from the campus. -*Religion News Service*