

Pat Smith Gary Koerner Chester Heights Campmeeting

Police arrest three for arson at Delco Christian camp January 07, 2012 | By Jan Hefler, INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Two men and a woman were charged over the weekend with arson-related offenses in the October torching of a historic Delaware County camp meeting church and two cottages used for summer retreats.

The suspects are not affiliated with the Chester Heights Camp Meeting, a non-denominational Christian retreat south of Rte. 1, State Tpr. Rosemarie McGuire said. The three will be arraigned Jan. 25 in district court in Aston.

Daniel J. Johnson, 22, of Chadds Ford, is charged with arson and other offenses; John M. Kasper, 26, of West Bradford, with tampering with evidence and criminal and defiant trespassing. Police also charged Elizabeth S. Hegadorn, 25, of Rushland, with criminal and defiant trespassing.

The charges were filed by Trp. John Stewart, a state police fire marshal, after more than two months of investigation. McGuire did not know the relationship between the suspects or their motives. But she said they could face jail if convicted. She also said the suspects could be ordered to pay for the losses.

The Rev. Reid Stroud officiates at the Sunday evening services, Gospel concerts and other music presentations that are held at the site from June through September. He said the Tabernacle church was built in 1872. But the two-story church has not been used for the past 20 years so services are held in a 125-seat gazebo. He estimated the church's value at 1.5 million.

The camp meeting, a 31-acre site nestled in a wooded area off Valley Brook Road, was unoccupied when the structures were set on fire shortly after 4 a.m., police said.

Stroud said that one of the cottages that were destroyed in the Oct. 16 blaze - among a community of 65 cottages - contained valuable items that a married missionary couple had taken back from Japan. Among them were vases, blankets and art. He said the other cottage served as an art studio. He did not know the value of the two cottages.

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Pat Smith, president of the camp meeting association, could not be reached for comment. On the association's website, she called the fire "a terrible tragedy, a loss for not just our members and cottage owners, but for the history and heritage of Delaware County."

The camp meeting has about 40 members but its services are open to the public. Reid said they attract about 90 people each Sunday.

The website said the 9-alarm fire started in the church and then spread to three adjacent cottages, gutting two. The camp meeting is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and received a historic preservation award from the Heritage Commission of Delaware County last May for restoring 11 of the early 20th century Victorian frame cottages.

A Methodist-Episcopal church established the camp meeting but it became non-denominational in the 1980s.

The camp meeting asks that donations for the restoration of the church be sent to CHCM, 40 Patricia Lane, Glen Mills, PA 19342.

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