

Episcopal misconduct?

By [Richard A. Kauffman](#)

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Two days after Christmas, Heather Elizabeth Cook, suffragan bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Maryland, [hit and killed a bicyclist with her car](#). The deceased, Thomas Palermo, left behind a wife and two small children, ages four and six. Cook left the scene of the accident, despite having a badly cracked windshield from the impact. According to one report, she only returned to the scene because another cyclist chased her down.

The police have released no details suggesting drugs or alcohol were involved. But Cook had a previous DUI incident in 2010, before she became a bishop. In that incident she was initially charged with driving under the influence, reckless driving, and possession of marijuana. She admitted to smoking pot while driving. One of her tires was shredded down to the rim.

Apparently this information wasn't shared across the diocese when Cook was voted in this spring as the number two bishop, [leaving some members feeling betrayed](#). Some even accuse the search committee of being so keen to elect the first female bishop in the diocese that it chose to overlook her previous run-in with the law.

The clergy and laity of the diocese are understandably in turmoil over this. Some Episcopalian friends of mine live only a mile from where the accident took place. Yesterday, they and apparently many other Episcopalians joined an informal memorial service for Palermo. [As one blogger noted](#), it is not a time to rush to judgment, since so little is known yet about the circumstances of the accident.

I'm a cyclist. Whenever I hear of such an accident, I'm reminded how dangerous it is to bike on the same roads traversed by cars and other vehicles. It's riskier now than ever, with so many drivers distracted by cell phones. A few years ago I came upon a bicycle accident involving a young driver who admitted (at first) to using his phone. He ran off the road, hitting and killing a father and his young daughter in a bike seat behind him.

The hit-and-run aspect here reminds me of a childhood incident. When I was in grade school, my mother drove out in front of a car at the crown of a hill where it was difficult to see traffic coming from the right. A car swerved to miss us—he would have hit my side of the car—and ran off the road and wrecked. My mother panicked. Instead of stopping, she drove home to get my father, and then they went right back to the scene of the accident. I was too young to know if she was charged with leaving the scene of an accident she had caused. But given this experience, I'm less inclined to judge Cook for leaving the scene and then coming back.

I also approach this incident as someone who is keenly interested in the question of what qualifies a person to be a leader in the church. Should bishops, pastors, and other leaders be held to a higher standard of morality than laypeople? One Episcopal church member cited 1 Timothy 3, which says bishops should be above reproach and, among other things, not be drunkards.

As a Mennonite, I'm inclined to say that all Christians should be held to the same standards—and that leaders should be held accountable to those standards. Bishops and pastors are human, and they will let us down; forgiveness is in order for them, too. Depending on the nature of clerical misconduct, it's appropriate for the judicatories involved to remove a person from office, at least temporarily, which is what the Maryland diocese has done.

We don't have all the facts yet, but it's possible the diocese is culpable for putting a person into an office for which she wasn't prepared. If Cook has an alcohol problem, that should be attended to—it's not too late for that. Unfortunately it is too late for her victim and his family.