

Episcopal bishop charged with manslaughter, driving under the influence

News in the [February 4, 2015](#) issue

An Episcopal bishop in Maryland is accused of killing a bicyclist while driving drunk and texting.

Heather Cook, 58, an assistant, or suffragan, bishop, turned herself in to police January 9. Marilyn Mosby, the Baltimore City state's attorney, announced the charges against Cook at a news conference earlier that day, both Episcopal News Service and the *Baltimore Sun* reported.

The criminal charges included negligent homicide involving operating an auto while impaired. Cook was also charged with leaving the scene of the accident.

Bicyclist Thomas Palermo, 41, died from head injuries on December 27.

At the press conference, the state's attorney said Cook's blood alcohol level was .22 percent after she returned to the scene more than 30 minutes after the accident occurred. The state's attorney also said that Cook was using text messaging on her phone at the time of the accident. Cook is believed to have veered into the bike lane and struck Palermo from behind.

The bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Maryland, [Eugene Taylor Sutton](#), released a statement on January 9, saying that the diocese is "deeply heartbroken over this, and we cry for the Palermo family, our sister Heather, and all in the community who are hurting." He commended law enforcement officials for their "thoroughness and care" in the investigation.

The diocese noted that the Episcopal Church is conducting an internal investigation. Since Cook is a bishop, that investigation is under the jurisdiction of the denomination and Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori. Church disciplinary proceedings began about a week before the Maryland state charges were announced.

"The disciplinary process, known internally as Title IV for the section of the Church's Constitution dealing with discipline procedures, is in place to objectively investigate

and determine appropriate action by the Episcopal Church,” the diocese said in a statement.

The charges against Cook led the diocese to acknowledge that when Cook was a candidate for suffragan bishop, she disclosed that she had been arrested in 2010 for driving while intoxicated. The *Sun* reported that her blood alcohol level at that time was 0.27 and law enforcement officials found marijuana in her vehicle. A judge fined her \$300 and sentenced her to supervised probation, ENS reported.

“After extensive discussion and discernment about the incident, and after further investigation, including extensive background check and psychological investigation, it was determined that this one mistake should not bar her for consideration as a leader,” the Maryland diocese said in a December 30 statement.

However, the clergy and laypeople who elected Cook in May 2014 were “not told about the 2010 arrest,” Sharon Tillman, the diocese’s director of communications, told ENS on January 9.

While the Episcopal Church did not comment on legal charges or proceedings, Neva Rae Fox, public affairs officer, said in a statement that “Cook will not be permitted to exercise her ordained ministry in the foreseeable future.”