Recent Bicycle Tragedies Illustrate Need for Awareness

By Dr. William Chunestudy, Resource Education Specialist at Adventist Risk Management, Inc.
On my way in the early morning light to pick up some students, my phone vibrated as a text came in from the principal of our school. The sun would be up soon and it promised to be a big day. Our school was scheduled to participate in a regional volleyball tournament. As a small Adventist school, this event was a big deal for students and faculty alike.

I glanced down at the incoming text and quickly looked back up again. The road looked clear ahead, so I looked back down at my phone. I saw that the principal had texted the address of where I was to pick up a student who was running late. I thought to myself, I know right where that is. It’s just up the road on the left.

As I approached the intersection, I slowed the car down and turned on my blinker. A couple of cars, at least a half a block away, were easy to see because of their bright headlights. I glanced back down at the address on my cell, then I turned the corner—boom! Something hit the back of the van. It was kind of a sickening thud. Instantly, I knew something really bad had happened. I quickly stopped, jumped out of the van, and looked around. My worst fears were realized. The scene was filled with a bent-up bicycle, a body writhing and moaning, and the traffic around screeching to a stop.

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screeching to a stop.

A horrible scenario, but, sadly, not an uncommon one. There are no winners when an automobile and a bicycle collide.

Any incident involving an auto and a bicycle will likely have tragic results for the cyclist. While we should appropriately focus first on the injured cyclist, the damages can go well beyond medical bills. The actual number of auto versus bicycle incidents has increased recently\(^1,\, 2\) and the awarded damages from such incidents are growing\(^3\).

Within the past six months, in the state of California alone, there have been three serious accidents involving denominational employees, automobiles and bicycles. Lawsuits, litigation, and settlements have increased, greatly impacting church resources of money, time and anxiety. All these come at the expense of ministry.

We are all keenly aware of the dangers of distracted driving, and in our scenario above there were several fundamental safeguards that could have helped to avoid this tragedy.

1. Pull over and stop the car before responding to a call or text.
2. Be aware of the additional hazards of driving in the early morning light, dusk, and dark.
3. Be aware of unique situations created by the growing number of bicycles on our roadways today, especially urban communities.

The focus of this article will be on the growing number of cyclists. But first, let’s look at the current trends related to bicycle riding in the U.S.

**Bicycle Rider Trends**

A 2011 study by Rutgers University professor John Pucher defines the following trends\(^3\):

- During the past two decades the number of bicycle commuters in the United States increased by 64\(^%\).  
- Bicycling is growing fastest in large cities like Chicago, Minneapolis, New York, San Francisco, and Portland, Oregon—doubling since 1990. This is due in part to the development by cities of an “infrastructure” that makes biking a more attractive option for commuters.  
- Most of the growth of bicycling has been among men, aged 25-64 years old.

**Bicycle Accident Statistics**

According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration\(^4\)

- There were 677 deaths in 2011, up 8.7\(^%\) over the previous year. This number is approximately 2\(^%\) of all traffic deaths in the US.
- There were 52,000 reported injuries involving bicyclists, but according to hospital research, only a fraction of the actual injuries are recorded by police, possibly as little as 10% are reported.
- The average age of cyclists killed in a crash was 41-years-old.
- 87% of all cyclists killed were male.
- 13% of all fatalities were children under the age of 16.

**Bicycle Accident-Cause Statistics**

In a study released for Chanel 5 in Boston, Doug Mink reported on the most common situations leading to accidents between vehicles and bicycles.

- When auto and bike were on parallel paths approaching each other, the most common accidents occurred when the motorist made a left turn into the path of a bicycle. Other incidents occurred when an automobile was passing a bicycle and misjudged the distance needed to safely pass.
- When an auto and bicycle were on intersecting paths, most accidents occurred when motorist failed to yield right-of-way at a junction.
- A large number of accidents occurred when cyclists failed to yield right-of-way.
- It is clear that in the litigious society in which we live we must be ever more vigilant and careful when behind the wheel. Cities and municipalities are doing their part to make bicycling safer and we must do the same.

**Safeguards for Automobile Drivers**

As we drive, what can we do to help keep the road safer for cyclists?

1. Focus. It may seem obvious, but first and foremost when behind the wheel, our focus must be on our driving, understanding that accidents can happen in a split second.
2. Minimize distractions. We’ve all heard it a thousand times but it never should get old. Don’t text! Don’t answer that phone call! Don’t eat! Don’t even assist a child sitting next to you who spills something in the car! Pull over and stop!
3. Awareness. Become aware of the unique dangers and safeguards regarding bicyclists.
   1. Expect cyclists on the road at all times.
   2. Slow down when approaching a cyclist.
   3. Cyclists can act unpredictably.
   4. Always allow three feet clearance when passing a bicycle.
   5. Always look for the possibility of an approaching cyclist when making a left turn.
   6. Always yield to an oncoming bicycle when making a left turn. Legally, they have the right-of-way.
   7. When sitting in a parallel-parked auto, always check your mirror for approaching bicycles before opening your driver’s side door.
   8. Avoid honking your horn, as it can be startling for a cyclist. They always hear you approaching.
   9. Do not expect cyclists to use hand signals for turning. It is generally unsafe for them to let go with either hand.
10. Never make a right turn just after passing a bicycle. It’s easy to misjudge the speed of the bicycle.
11. Lower your headlights when approaching a cyclist from the opposite direction. Give the cyclist the same courtesy as another auto driver.
12. Cyclists can ride in regular traffic lanes when necessary. Always provide the same cautions and courtesies as any other vehicle.
13. In low light or bad weather situations always drive with extreme caution.

Safeguards for Bicyclists

Bicyclists can also help avoid incidents with attention to the following:

1. Follow all traffic laws and rules of the road.
2. Always wear a helmet. Bicyclists’ deaths are greatly reduced when helmets are worn.
3. In low-light situations wear reflective gear and have reflectors and lights on your bike.

Most safety issues regarding automobile versus bicycle are simple common sense. Risky behavior and distracted driving/riding by either auto driver or cyclist can lead to disaster. Most problems can be avoided by simple awareness and single-minded focus on your driving or riding environment. Be smart. Be safe. Be alert. Let’s safeguard our ministries by doing all we can to further reduce the risks caused by “Automobile vs. Bicycle,” where no one wins.

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