

# No slavery, no exceptions | GJSentinel.com

By Guest Columnist

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**By Brenda Brown**

The essential value of human dignity calls us to pivot from all forms of the antiquated and unenlightened practice of slavery. As Coloradans we should be proud of our Colorado State Constitution, especially Article 2 Section 26, which abolishes slavery.

Unfortunately, after close examination by a group of faith leaders from Together Colorado, we realized slavery was not completely abolished from our state Constitution. The following language included at the end of Section 26 negates our complete turn from slavery:

“There shall never be in this state either slavery or involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime, whereof the party shall have been duly convicted.”

We were dismayed to find the same language in our United States Constitution and other state constitutions across the country. Thus, the No Slavery, No Exceptions campaign led by Together Colorado was launched as a result of this discovery. We are leading an effort to completely abolish slavery and involuntary servitude in Colorado.

It is time we abandon the inhumane language of this exception, written in the 19th century, during a period in our country's history when not all people were treated with human dignity nor seen as human. Two centuries later we are better than that and it is time to dismantle this symbol of racial division. As residents of Colorado, we must be the leaders, to take hold of this crucial opportunity to lead our nation towards true freedom and human dignity for ALL.

Freedom and equality are fundamental Colorado values that should be reflected in the language of our Colorado state constitution. Removing this exception will give us the opportunity to begin a dialogue to transform Colorado and potentially what the entire country will look like for future generations to come.

Healing begins when symbols that divide us are struck down. With the language removed, our Colorado communities, families, schools, and places of worship can vigorously dismantle other barriers that separate us. Together we will continue to build relationships across difference promoting equality, human dignity and freedom.

The process for striking the exception for slavery and involuntary servitude is called a referred measure. This means the Colorado House of Representatives and the Senate must each pass the referred measure by two-thirds vote, before it goes to the knowledgeable and bold voters of Colorado to make it a reality.

We want to thank our current courageous sponsors of the No Slavery, No Exceptions referred measure, Sen. Ulibarri and Reps. Salazar and Melton for their vision of a great Colorado that is inclusive of all Coloradans.

As people of faith, we believe that slavery is not a human value; we believe that no one is a slave — with no exceptions. Now is the time, to strike the archaic language and begin healing racial divides to unify, strengthen and uplift all of our communities.

*Rev. Brenda Brown is the senior minister at First Congregational United Church of Christ in Grand Junction and is a faith leader of Together Colorado.*

## No Slavery, No Exceptions Op-Ed for the Boulder Camera March, 2016

Colorado is a state with high ideals for liberty and justice for all. As faith leaders, we are proud to live and work in this state. However, a group of faith leaders from Together Colorado were shocked to learn that slavery was never **completely** abolished in our Colorado State Constitution. Article 2 Section 26 reads: *There shall never be in this state either slavery or involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime, whereof the party shall have been duly convicted.* We found this same language in our United States Constitution and fellow state constitutions across the country.

This discovery launched the No Slavery, No Exceptions Campaign led by Together Colorado, a non-partisan, multi-racial, multi-faith community organization that unlocks the power of people to transform their communities through community organizing. We want to completely abolish slavery and involuntary servitude in our state, and, eventually, across the country.

The 19th century language of this constitutional exception is archaic, written during a period when Americans were just beginning to dismantle the economic incentives to slavery, and nowhere near understanding the impact the legacy of slavery would leave on generations of Black Americans. Further, as attorney and social scientist Michelle Alexander so compellingly demonstrates in her groundbreaking book *The New Jim Crow*, mass incarceration of African Americans has, since the 1970s, become a deliberate *means* to deprive this population of rights and access to services. This 'exception to slavery' has very real implications for the lives of all people of color in America.

In his March 20, 2016 column, Leonard Pitts draws the links for us: any individual once convicted of a felony now faces a lifetime of fully legal discrimination. If you have a record you can legally be denied employment, housing, licensure or the right to start a business - to name but a few examples. Pitts speaks of a "new American ethos where punishment never ends" To us, it sounds a lot like slavery.

Now, in the twenty-first century, it is time to dismantle this symbol of racial division that is one more blemish on our justice system. As residents of Colorado, we must be the leaders to take hold of this crucial opportunity to lead our nation towards true freedom and human dignity for **ALL**.

Our Boulder community values freedom and equality as fundamental human dignities - which should be reflected in the language of our Colorado state constitution. We are a community that is committed to ending oppression of all kinds in our schools and our public institutions, including our criminal justice system. How can we hold ourselves accountable to this work when our state constitution allows an exception to slavery? Removing this exception will give us the opportunity to further dialogue that transforms Colorado and potentially the entire country. We

can be a model for the nation, helping us all live up to our founding ideals of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

The No Slavery No Exceptions Campaign is calling for a referred measure to take this archaic and hurtful language out of our Constitution. This means the Colorado House of Representatives and the Senate must each pass the referred measure by 2/3 vote. Then, it can go to the ballot for the Colorado voters to make it a reality!

We want to thank our current courageous sponsors of the No Slavery, No Exceptions referred measure; Senator Ulibarri and Representatives Salazar and Melton for their vision of a **great** Colorado that is inclusive of all Coloradans.

As people of faith, we believe that slavery is not a human value; we believe that **no one is a slave – with no exceptions!** Now is the time, to strike the archaic language and begin healing racial divides to unify, strengthen and uplift **all** of our communities.

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**Together Colorado is a non-partisan, multi-racial, multi-faith community organization that unlocks the power of people to transform their communities through community organizing. For more information, see our website: [www.togethercolorado.org](http://www.togethercolorado.org)**

This OP-ED has not been published elsewhere.

**“No Slavery, No Exceptions”  
(for Pueblo Chieftain, March 24, 1016 Version)**

As Coloradans we are proud of our Colorado State Constitution, especially Article 2 Section 26 which abolishes slavery. However, after closer examination by a group of Faith Leaders from Together Colorado, we realized that slavery was not completely abolished because of the language at the end of the section:

Section 26: There shall never be in this state either slavery or involuntary servitude, *except as a punishment for crime, whereof the party shall have been duly convicted.*

In Colorado this discovery launched the *No Slavery, No Exceptions* Campaign led by Together Colorado, and supported by Pueblo’s Faith Leaders in Action, an effort to abolish the so stated exception for slavery and involuntary servitude.

The language of this sentence is archaic, written in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, during a period in our country’s history when not all people were treated with human dignity nor were all people seen as human. Now, in the twenty-first century, it is time to dismantle this symbol of racial division. As residents of Colorado and this nation, we must be leaders, taking hold of this opportunity to move out of the past’s shadows, towards freedom and human dignity for all today.

With struggle Puebloans have long worked toward the values of equality, human dignity and freedom. These values have been celebrated in the comingling of various ethnic and cultural groups, be it for economic ends, neighborhood peace, or the expression of religious and humanitarian values. Now more than ever we want to exercise these values in word and deed. And we want values respecting human dignity echoed in our state constitution.

Freedom and equality are fundamental Colorado values which should be reflected in the language of our state constitution. As symbols of slavery that divide us are struck down, healing begins. As this language is removed, our Colorado communities, families, schools, and places of worship can focus on healing racial divides. We can use this opportunity to work towards a unity founded in equality, human dignity, and freedom for all.

The process for striking Colorado’s Constitutional exception for slavery and involuntary servitude is called a referred measure. This means the Colorado House of Representatives and the Senate must each pass the referred measure by 2/3 vote, before it goes to the knowledgeable and bold voters of Colorado to make it a reality!

We want to thank our current courageous sponsors of the *No Slavery, No Exceptions* referred measure; Senator Ulibarri and Representatives Salazar and Melton for their vision of a Colorado that is inclusive of all Coloradans.

As people of faith, we believe that slavery is not a human value; we believe that **no one is a slave – with no exceptions!** **Now** is the time, to strike the archaic language and heal racial divides to unify, strengthen and uplift all of our communities.

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Faith Leaders in Action in collaboration with Together Colorado

*Together Colorado is a non-partisan, multi-racial, multi-faith community organization that unlocks the power of people to transform their communities through community organizing. Faith Leaders in Action, FLiA, is a Pueblo based affiliate working with Together Colorado on this initiative.*

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## Pastors push to remove "slavery" from state constitution

The Rev. Nelson Bock of Together Colorado leads a prayer at a press conference Monday to support a potential ballot measure to remove references to slavery from the state constitution. (Photo by Joey Bunch/The Denver Post)

Clergy and community members gathered at the state Capitol Monday to campaign for Senate Concurrent Resolution 006, which would put a measure on the ballot to make it clear that prison labor isn't "slavery."

They want the reference to slavery edited out of the state constitution, which was written in 1877.

"To equate incarceration as a punishment for a crime with the abhorrent, immoral and ungodly institution of slavery is an affront to both the dignity of incarcerated persons as well as to the dignity of people whose ancestors were subject to the cruelty of slavery in our country," said the Rev. Nelson Bock of Together Colorado, the multi-faith, multi-racial organization pushing the measure.

"There shall never be in this state either slavery or involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime, whereof the party shall have been duly convicted."

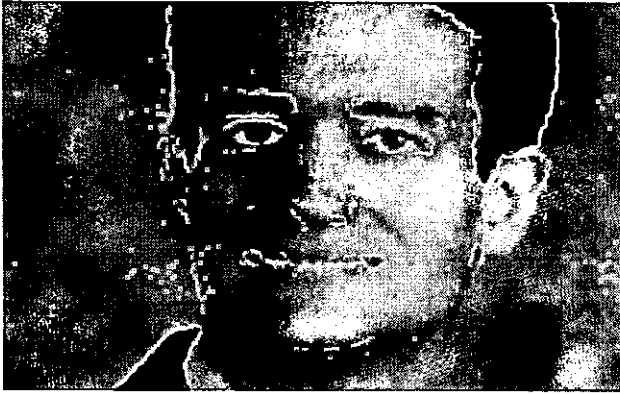
— Article 2, Section 26 of the 1877 Colorado Constitution

The resolution was introduced in the Senate by Jessie Ulibarri of Westminster. Its House sponsors are Joe Salazar of Thornton and Jovan Melton of Aurora.

"From a faith perspective, particularly from the African-American community, we want to make it crystal clear it is overdue for an upgrade in the archaic language that exists in the Colorado bill of rights," said Pastor Del Phillips, president of the Greater Denver Ministerial Alliance. "We don't want that archaic language to imply that the morals and the sensibilities of our current society is also archaic. We believe, as a people, we have progressed greatly from a time of slavery."

The campaign is called "No Slavery No Exceptions" to "remove 19th century language from a 21st century constitution," which "would help heal racial divides and would promote a stronger and united Colorado community," according to organizers.

"Slavery is not a Colorado value," said Sharon Bridgeforth, board president of Together Colorado and president of the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs Inc.



As Coloradans we are proud of our Colorado State Constitution, especially Article 2 Section 26 which abolishes slavery. However, after closer examination by a group of Faith Leaders from Together Colorado, we realized it was not completely abolished because of the following language that was included at the end:

There shall never be in this state either slavery or involuntary servitude, *except as a punishment for crime, whereof the party shall have been duly convicted.*

We then found the same language in our United States Constitution and fellow state constitutions across the country. This discovery launched the No Slavery, No Exceptions Campaign led by Together Colorado in effort to completely abolish slavery and involuntary servitude.

Genesis, the foundation of Judeo-Christian Scriptural teaching, informs us that humanity was created *b'tzelem elokim* - in the image of God - a teaching that, de facto disables us from living in silos of social isolation; rather, our mandate is to recognize our common humanity, to respect each other, and to be on watch for the vulnerability of those whose human dignity has been denied.

Moreover, the Jewish and Christian people are deeply wedded to the concepts of slavery and freedom, and we are reminded of them when we observe our sacred celebrations of Passover, Shabbat and Easter. The Torah beckons us (in Deuteronomy 24:18): ***Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and that the Lord your God redeemed you from there ...***, and ergo the commandment to perform acts of justice, and pay attention to the ways that we can make a difference in reducing the suffering of others. And Shabbat, the Sabbath Day is a weekly celebration of our freedom carried out through the lifting up of praises to our Creator and Liberator, rest from our creative labors, and, not least, the practice of hospitality to the wayfarer.

While the Torah was revealed to the people of Israel in a world in which slavery existed and was deeply embedded in the very fabric of all of society, its legislation over time pursued the reduction of its scope and its cruelties. The closing chapters of Deuteronomy and, later, the teachings of the Sages decry the institution of slavery, such that Judaism and Christianity stand for bringing the world to a rejection of this evil phenomenon. As many valiant Jews and Christians stood with their fellow Americans for the pursuit of civil rights in the 1960s, so must we be awakened to the need for passionate and faithful advocacy on behalf of those whose God-given freedoms are denied - no matter how nuanced and fractional their place in our society might be.

This new level of consciousness comes in the form of dignity. When one defines dignity via Google Dictionary one will find this definition: the state or quality of being worthy of honor or respect. For the purposes of this editorial we would like to use the definition by Dr. Philomena Essed, Professor Antioch University PhD Leadership and Change that states: "Dignity is the ability to recognize your own sense of self-worth through the acknowledgement of the same worth of others." This worth is invaluable; therefore, one

should not be legal property of another, forced to obey, and work under inhumane conditions. This God-given freedom is solely based on being human.

Both of our faith traditions cast us in the image and likeness of God. This image is not contingent upon doing right or wrong; it is the essence of who we are as human beings and children of the Supreme Ruler of the Universe. Removing the slavery clause will insert humanity back into an inhumane system designed not to dehumanize or behave in an undignified manner but to punish violators of the law with the hopes of rehabilitation, grace, mercy, and forgiveness as well as restoration; for there is no condemnation in God's name. Furthermore, where the spirit of the Lord is there is liberty – the liberty and freedom to be human regardless of the situation or circumstance.

As people of faith, we believe that slavery is not a human value; we believe that **no one is a slave – with no exceptions!** Now is the time, to strike the archaic language and begin healing racial divides to unify, strengthen and uplift **all** of our communities.

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