

Good afternoon! I am honored to have the opportunity to share my thoughts and feelings with regard to the question before all of you as to whether to and even how to amend Article 1 of Chapter 1 of the Vermont Constitution. While this article recognizes enslaved people to include persons of color, poor, female, certain age, or otherwise understood to be less than human or of less than equal value to the historically dominant in Vermont and in America, my testimony is rooted in the ideas and behaviors born of racism and white privilege, their import in our history and continued influence in our thinking, behavior, and laws of today.

I was first invited to testify last week as a clergy person. I was ordained in the United Church of Christ (UCC) in 2016 after a 32+ year career in healthcare. I am the pastor for the Malletts Bay Congregational Church, UCC. While my faith and role as pastor influences my sharing, most influential to my being here is my role as a mother. A little background. I have lived in Vermont since I was 5 years old. My husband and I have lived in Jeffersonville, VT since 1991 and raised three children, who all are now adults.

My husband is a black man. Therefore, our children are black. Something all of us are very proud of though I cannot dismiss the influence friends, teachers, society in general had on telling them, teaching them that they are black, and not in positive ways.

It was a course in seminary and two particular assignments back in 2012 that opened my eyes to 'white privilege' in this country. For the first time I recognized the privilege I grew up and lived my life with simply and only because of the color of my skin. Because of this privilege I had failed to recognize the systemic restrictions to access of equality, freedom, inclusivity, and respect.

Beyond my book learning though, early in the summer of 2013 my two oldest children shared stories about growing up in rural Vermont as non-white children. I could no longer keep silent because of my angst, my distress, my disbelief, my pain, my anger, my mourning and grief and shame as a result of my children's life stories up to that point in time *and* the then recent verdict of the acquittal of George Zimmerman of the murder of Trayvon Martin. I felt called to share my own feelings and experience as a pastor, a mom, and as a white person in American and in Vermont so I wrote and shared a sermon. A sermon that has evolved and has been shared with many people in many venues these past 6 years.

My now-adult children sharing their life experiences as children born and raised by a white mother and black father in Vermont changed me. Frankly, this honesty changed us as a family. I had no idea. These were people I lived with, people I love more than anything in this world, my flesh and blood, and I did not see, had not seen the effects of systems rooted in white privilege in their lives. It was no longer only my intellect that was informed, my emotional, my physical, and yes, my spiritual cores were shaken and awakened. It should not have taken a 3-

credit seminary course or such an opening of old wounds by my children to open my eyes – but it did. As difficult as it has been, I am grateful that now I see. Once one sees, one cannot un-see. And one cannot not act.

My "children" now range in age from 22 to 30 so the time frame of all of this is not in the distant past. We are talking the late 20th and current 21st century. How did I not know about these things that hurt them so? Those that I did - because my daughter taught me to see with new vision when she was pre-adolescent – how did I not see the pain it caused? How can that be? How do we not see or hear or recognize racism? How do we not see or are able to ignore the systems rooted in rules and laws and practices that promote white supremacy? How do people see another human being as somehow so different that they may be perceived, understood, and treated so differently, so badly solely because of their appearance? All of this is so embedded, so insidious that the angst and discomfort felt by my children was not understood by them as to why until they left Vermont and found other people of color who had similar feelings and experiences simply, painfully, because of the color of their skin.

My original sermon initially used the Christian scriptures of the Holy Bible about finding the hidden pearl and selling all we have to have the pearl of true equality. In 2016, I was honored to preach at a synagogue where I adapted my original sermon with a focus on the Hebrew Scripture, Leviticus 13:47-59. This text addresses diseases of the skin and the contamination of our clothing, and how to treat, how to excise such disease. Another level of discernment and truth was revealed.

If we are to honestly tackle the racism that does exist in this country, in our state, in our cities and towns –we, the white population must recognize our role and work for change. I admit that this is a shift in perception, and a shift in responsibility. We must excise the disease of racism and white privilege that pervades our society. As a nation, dehumanizing people of color is in our DNA, enslaving people is deeply embedded as a thread in the fabric that is America.

I recently learned that the initial request of this amendment was to explicitly state both in the title and in the document the words "slavery is prohibited." Yet, that is not what was proposed to you, this committee, or in the document I received outlining the proposed amendment. My question is why not? It is not complicated. In fact, in the proposal that is PR2 the "subject" is "Declaration of rights; eliminating reference to slavery." The point is not or should not be about eliminating reference to slavery. It is not about erasing the history of slavery in this country, in this state. That would be and is counter-productive. What this amendment should be about and should do is to prohibit slavery in all its forms from this day forward. What needs to be done by you, you who have power in 2019, is very clear and should be easy, dare I say simple, to denounce, to reject, to prohibit slavery in the verbiage of our State Constitution so as to promote attitudes and actions. Don't erase our history because what happened was and is wrong so as to make you feel better, to deny reality, or attempt to move on without acknowledgement of the past that was and is wrong and unjust. Prohibit

slavery now recognizing the evil that it was and is and shall always be. Anything else, anything less is unacceptable and not worthy of the time, cost, or effort of so many human beings, children of God, seeking, demanding, and worthy of basic human dignity and respect.

I cannot tell you how I wish I had been more aware, more in tune, and how I wish our friends, our children's teachers and peers, our community had been more aware of the harm and the hurt their words and actions caused to people they, I do believe, loved and cared about. How much I regret my ignorance and blindness to what is so visible to the receiving end of dehumanization that allows us to enslave. ANYTHING that can be done to prevent slavery, in any form, must be done if we are to be a truly free and united State. May you do what once was considered bold, and today I offer that which is not only the correct and honorable response, but frankly something that should be obvious, easy, and uncomplicated. Like me, may you see so that you can no longer not see and with your new vision may you see the obvious, so as to do the obvious, and what is right, honorable and just.