

## Advocate urges lawyers to ‘make inclusion come alive’

■ Todd Nelson

Many of the pledges made toward advancing racial justice after George Floyd was killed more than three years ago are unfulfilled, according to Dr. Artika Tyner, an attorney, educator, author and advocate.

While Minnesota is among 30 states that have passed police oversight and reform laws, African Americans still are twice as likely to be killed by police as whites, Tyner said. Sentencing disparities have not changed, though the Minnesota Freedom Fund, a nonprofit that pays bail for low-income individuals, is among cash-bail reforms that have emerged.

Tyner said she doesn't know today what has happened to the \$200 billion to \$340 billion U.S. companies have pledged to support racial justice efforts after Floyd's murder.

For that matter, Tyner said, little has improved in the 30 years since the Minnesota Supreme Court Task Force on Racial Bias issued its final report. It found that people of color were more likely to be arrested, charged, prosecuted, convicted and given longer sentences than their white counterparts. The only difference in those outcomes, was “how much melanin is in your skin,” she said.

### PROMISES ‘NOT MET YET’

“As we're looking at these promises, to a certain extent, I would say these are broken promises,” Tyner said. “Or if I'm going to be Minnesota Nice, not met yet. Progress needs to happen. ... It should



Dr. Artika Tyner, right, stands with Shannon Eckman, a Bassford Remele attorney, on Thursday at Tyner's seminar, “The Inclusive Lawyer.” (Photo: Todd Nelson)

be sobering to say we have some promises that we still need to meet.”

Tyner offered strategies to help fulfill those promises and “make inclusion come alive in meaningful ways” at her seminar on “The Inclusive Lawyer” on Wednesday, June 21. The seminar expanded on Tyner's book, “The Inclusive Leader,” which the American Bar Association published in 2021. The Bassford Remele law firm hosted the event, which drew an audience of 60.

To define the role of an inclusive lawyer, Tyner cited the preamble of the ABA's Model Rules of Professional Conduct, which state in part, “As a public citizen, a lawyer should seek improvement of the law, access to the legal system, the administration of justice and the quality of service rendered by the legal profession.”

That's an invitation, Tyner said, for lawyers to use their training and practical experience to make improvements in society. She encouraged lawyers

to remember why they pursued their profession. Research finds that most say they want to undo a societal wrong or bring about change.

“Did we lose that message?” Tyner said. “Where did it go if we have that list of broken promises? But, more importantly, my guess is that if we all commit to activate hope in some meaningful ways, we can create change.”

### **INCLUSIVE LEADERSHIP SKILLS**

To serve as inclusive leaders, lawyers need to develop core competencies including self-awareness, or embracing their cultural heritage and celebrating those of others, according to Tyner’s presentation. The other competencies are communication, including communicating effectively across cultures; problem solving, which includes strengthening creative thinking and developing higher levels of emotional resilience; and emotional intelligence, or developing empathy, compassion and confidence needed to engage in meaningful and deliberate action to advance racial and social justice.

Inclusive leadership, Tyner said, means embarking on a lifelong learning journey to bring forth change and engage with others in meaningful ways. That’s essential as the population of the United States ages and diversifies, with the country projected to no longer have any ethnic majority by 2043 or sooner, if the undercounting of some groups is corrected.

Tyner, most recently a professor at the University of St. Thomas School of Law, has designed programs to drive diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives at a range of companies and government agencies. She’s focusing on inspiring children as the next generation of leaders through her nonprofit organization, Planting People Growing Justice.

“If the promise and the dream of America is our diversity, we need you to cultivate, we need to have new skills sets, we need you to be able to be the inspiration, we need you to be able to come together and see our shared humanity and our common destiny,” Tyner said in an interview.

### **CHALLENGE TO MAINTAIN DEI COMMITMENT**

Bassford Remele CEO and shareholder Mark Whitmore said hosting Tyner’s seminar is part of the firm’s work to continue the momentum behind diversity, equity and inclusion efforts that Floyd’s murder sparked, building on two decades of such programming.

“The issues are every bit as important but they’re not front-page news,” Whitmore said in an interview. “Our challenge as a firm and our challenge as a community is to maintain that same kind of enthusiasm, the same level of commitment.”

During the pandemic, members of the firm read and discussed the book “Uncomfortable Conversations with a Black Man,” by Emmanuel Acho, Whitmore said. Bassford Remele also established scholarships for three students at each of the three law schools in Minnesota. It hosts a yearly women’s initiative and has monthly DEI awareness lunches, which have addressed racism, women’s suffrage, gender pronouns and, this June, Pride Month.

Bassford Remele attorney Shannon Eckman, who took two classes with Tyner at the St. Thomas School of Law, said she hoped those at the seminar would come away with a “reinvigoration” of the efforts that came after Floyd’s killing.

“We’re trying to create some kind of action from it still, even three years later,” Eckman said. “It’s also recognizing that we’re all part of this effort. It takes everyone. Every individual in your role as a lawyer, in our community is really critical to that.”