November 2022

Dear Friends

Hope you are all well and adjusting as we slowly emerge from living under covid conditions. In this third year of epidemic, daily life is beginning to resemble what some call “the before times,” those good old days before covid struck. Although the virus will always be with us, public health departments expect society to manage, as it did through small pox, poliomyelitis, cholera, plague, and the 1918 influenza. Since vaccines were developed, cases, hospitalizations, and deaths have declined in number. We are focused on getting back to normal, in society, the economy, and our personal daily lives.

When we look at each other, we see fewer masked faces. We can go to restaurants, plays, movies, and concerts. We can travel more freely, even abroad. Our children have returned to their classrooms, but after long months of remote learning their skills in reading and mathematics have slipped below grade level.

One of my organizations, the community policing group, has resumed in-person meetings, but another, a more than 50-year-old professional publishing organization, did not survive. Another group is still meeting online because it can’t return to its old meeting place.

Some features of life under covid persist. We continue to get boosters, as we do for flu and polio. Wearing a mask in social settings still protects us and our neighbors. Sometimes at the grocery we still cannot buy fresh meat or margarine, and some manufacturers still lack parts and raw materials. An emergency food pantry here that was opened early in the epidemic has become permanent. Despite efforts by the neighborhood and the city, the majority of homeless people in the tent city near here have not been moved into permanent housing. Crime, which rose sharply early in the epidemic, shows no sign of abating.

The entertainment, food service, and travel industries are reviving, but vacant storefronts and movie houses and at least two popular but now shuttered restaurants blight our neighborhood. Heartbreaking signs are posted in empty windows thanking neighborhood residents for their patronage over the years. My

impression of downtown Chicago (the Loop) is disheartening. It looks like an economically depressed urban area. So many large, dark, empty windows stare grimly onto sidewalks, where it seems not as many customers and office workers walk by. The streets seem less bustling, with fewer taxis and delivery trucks.

National Public Radio reports more job openings than job seekers. Social services and hospitals are understaffed. The City of Chicago cannot recruit enough police officers, election judges, or transit workers. On the family and personal level, some families are still caring for seriously ill parents or children and some families cannot ever return to the before times because they have lost loved ones.

We grieve what we have lost and we are grateful for what we still have. Some of us are reassessing our commitments and our values, deciding what is most important in our lives and making changes. We seek guides to the way forward.

We are still in transition. I hope my organizations will resume in-person activities. I hope new businesses will come to occupy the vacant commercial buildings. I hope the bereaved families will find consolation in their faith and in their friends. We can’t go back. We can’t recapture the before times. Don’t give up. Keep working together, helping each other. I often think our times are like the peacetime that follows war. We have to rebuild. We have to create the new normal.

Ellen