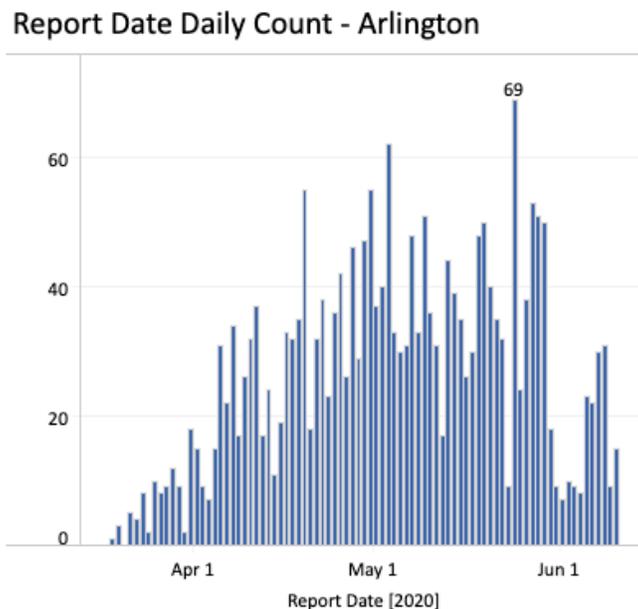


## An Update on Plans for St. Michael's

With every day that passes, it seems I miss our gatherings more and more! While there is much that I have gotten used to, the pain of not gathering together for worship, hearing your stories over coffee, and laughing with your children has not dulled, but intensified. Perhaps at the core of these challenges is that we do not control the timeline or the impact of this virus. Our illusions of control have evaporated before our very eyes. I was recently reminded that these words from the Lord's Prayer, "Thy will be done," can be some of the most challenging to fully affirm. Time and time again, scripture reminds us that God is trustworthy. Remember the journey of the Israelites through the wilderness, Mary affirming her vocation of motherhood, and Jesus traveling to the cross. These faithful witnesses help to remind us of the ways in which trusting God brings about transformation. This historic moment we occupy presents an opportunity to reaffirm our trust in God.

As local businesses and churches of other denominations have begun phased re-openings, I write to clarify how St. Michael's will move forward and when. There is a great deal that goes into answering these questions. Each aspect of society is opening for different reasons and based on varying rationale. The Vestry and I have been grappling with the [data](#) that must be considered. We are relying on local officials to properly communicate and monitor the public health situation. The reality remains that Arlington County has not yet achieved a fourteen-day consecutive decline in the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases, which is one of several baseline metrics informing all decisions about re-opening churches in the Episcopal Diocese of Virginia.



[This graph is taken from the interactive report made by the Virginia Health Department for Arlington County on June 10, 2020. State and county data may be accessed [here](#); click Locality to choose data specific to Arlington. From now on, we will share this data in our weekly email updates to the congregation.]

Further, there is an important distinction between assuming personal risk and spreading risk. Churches generally, and St. Michael's specifically, are multi-generational, involve movement within close proximity of one another, shared contact of surfaces, and welcome of individuals who are within various high-risk categories. For all of these reasons, and because you are individually valuable to the Body of Christ, we choose to move cautiously. There is an important difference between assuming personal risk and corporately accepting risk on behalf of others. Each decision the Vestry comes to involves a consideration of accepting risk on the behalf of others, and responsibility for producing risks as a community. While attending to the metrics of the virus, the leadership of St. Michael's remains firmly committed to our theological values.

Given that Arlington is still awaiting a decline in the prevalence of COVID-19, and the need to consider the well-being of all, the Vestry and I have decided that St. Michael's will remain in the current operational state at least until Labor Day. Once Arlington County has met the metrics for decline, there is much work to be done to alter the operational realities of our life together. (If you are curious, please take a look at the eighteen page [guidelines](#) detailing the precautions that must be implemented.) When we are able to gather in person, there is much that will be different.

What does this all mean about our hopes for gathering together?

- At least until Labor Day there will be no worship, gatherings of groups, or meetings in our buildings.
- Once we have met metrics for decline, it's possible that we will be able to open the sanctuary for individuals to use as a place for prayer, under controlled conditions.
- While we are not able to gather together as a whole body, the comfort and joy that comes from being in the presence of one another endures. With a thoughtful personal assessment of risk, you might consider gathering together in smaller groups, off campus, in private, outdoor settings, while adhering to guidelines for physical distancing, and wearing masks.

Remember, we are a people of hope! Though I am not certain of much these days, I am certain that God is at work in our midst. Given that communal singing will not be safe for the foreseeable future, and many questions remain about communion, congregational responses, and shared liturgical experiences, know that your leadership is thinking creatively about how we will worship together, in addition to online gatherings. Might it be in small groups in the memorial garden for contemplative prayer? Might we experiment with house churches (or yard churches), gathering over individual picnic blankets and loaves of bread? Might it mean volunteering at AFAC and gathering for prayers in the parking lot before and after? Additionally, we will have offerings over the summer that fall into the category of things to which we can look forward. We trust that God is still at work, and we will discern together how to join God in this work.

Do not lose hope. Trust that God's faithfulness is eternal. No matter what comes, we remain committed to God and to one another.

The Rev. Beth Franklin and the St. Michael's Vestry