The life of an Institute [Brothers of the Christian Schools/Lasallian] is a continual challenge to be creative while remaining faithful to its origins. It can sometimes call for difficult commitments, as John Baptist de La Salle discovered at various points in his life. Today, as in the past, he challenged the Brothers [and by association, all Lasallians], not only as the one who established the Institute but as the Founder who continues to inspire and sustain it.

Brother Luke Salm brings his book, "The Work is Yours" to a close with these words from the Brothers’ Rule:

“The life of an Institute [Brothers of the Christian Schools/Lasallian] is a continual challenge to be creative while remaining faithful to its origins. It can sometimes call for difficult commitments, as John Baptist de La Salle discovered at various points in his life. Today, as in the past, he challenged the Brothers [and by association, all Lasallians], not only as the one who established the Institute but as the Founder who continues to inspire and sustain it.”

It is with these words that we introduce the Midwest District’s on-line Lasallian Formation Program. Together and by Association we are part of this on-going story and legacy upon which we build each and everyday, touching the hearts of our students and those we encounter.

Our goal over the next six years is to explore various themes found within the story of Saint John Baptist de la Salle: his call; reading the signs of the times; vision; association with others to meet the educational needs of the marginal, disadvantaged, and poor; his experience of abandonment by others as well as his abandonment to the will of God; and the legacy he entrusted to all Lasallians today.

The On-Line Lasallian Formation program incorporates three components: Source (Factual/Historical Information), Personal Reflection, and a Community/Ministry Discussion. This brief introduction gives an overview of the three components focusing on a brief introduction into the life of Saint John Baptist de La Salle.
John Baptist de la Salle was born in Reims, France on April 30, 1651. He was born into a family of means and prestige destined to follow in the footsteps of his father as the eldest son.

Like many of us, John Baptist de la Salle experienced a call within his life. Influenced by those close to him, he was drawn not to the role of magistrate and in his father's footsteps, but in a different direction.

“Surrounded by love and endowed with a trusting spirit, the young De La Salle developed a natural sensitivity to the needs of others. This emerged in later life in what the biographers could call the ‘natural goodness’ of his ‘upright heart’.” (pg. 11 Salm)

In 1667, De La Salle, not yet 16 years of age, was invested as a canon of the cathedral at Reims. “The duties were principally to public prayer, especially the daily chanting in the cathedral choir of the liturgy of the hours and the capitular celebration of the Eucharist.” Besides the prestige attached to the office, each canon was assigned a house adjacent to the cathedral which he was free to rent as well as a fixed stipend for participation in liturgical services. The position of canon was indeed an ecclesial stepping stone as among its alumni were three popes, 23 cardinals, and more than 30 bishops.

Committed to his vocational call to priesthood, De La Salle began his studies in theology the fall of 1669. How often do life’s experiences challenge our call? In the course of 18 months of entering the seminary, both of De La Salle’s parents die and as eldest son he is responsible for his younger siblings and the family affairs. He returned home in April 1672 just shy of his twenty-first birthday. De La Salle would return to his studies and was ordained in 1678 and settling into the life of a priest and on course for a “brilliant career in the Church.”

A chance encounter with Adrien Nyel would change De La Salle’s aspiring life into a new direction which would set the course for the rest of his life. Adrien Nyel was in Reims seeking support to establish a quality school for poor boys. Such schools were already established for girls. De La Salle and Adrien Nyel met at the door of the Sisters of the Child Jesus in Reims. Nyel was invited to stay with De La Salle while he was in Reims and over the course of the week they strategized as to how Nyel’s project might be realized. Inviting pastors into the discussion they reflected on the needs of the children in Reims and in what we would call today, recognized the signs of the times. “They all seemed to agree that there was an urgent need to provide for the education of the poor boys who were running wild through the streets and alleys in the worst neighborhoods of Reims.” (Salm 32) And so on April 15, 1679 Adrien Nyel opened his first Christian school for poor boys of Reims. De La Salle was in the background to get the project off the ground and then return to normal on the clerical fast track in 17th century Reims.

Yet all was not well in Reims. Have you ever had the experience of “helping” someone only to get ensnuced (suckered) into the project and when you turn around to talk to your helpers no one is there? Nyel continued to open schools funded by patrons, in part due to De La Salle’s association. “But it soon became clear that, although Nyel was quite capable of establishing schools, he was not the best person to control or inspire the teachers. These rather young men were neither sufficiently trained nor adequately supervised for the work they were expected to do.” (Salm, 33)
Little by little De La Salle would be drawn into helping Nyel with his schools and little by little would find himself more and more involved in its operation, expansion, and formation of teachers. De La Salle's involvement was anchored in what he saw as the providence of God in his life. Immanently practical, a vision of what was needed for the schools to survive began to take shape as De La Salle gathered the teachers together providing housing, training, and supervision. Though his involvement with Nyel's project was becoming more central to his life, De La Salle still kept his distance writing, “I had thought the care which I took of the schools and the teachers would only be external, something which would not involve me any further than to provide for their subsistence and to see to it that they carried out their duties in a religious and conscientious manner.”

As the community and schools continued to grow, the teachers became more stabilized and established themselves as professional educators rather than seeing teaching as a temporary job. They became increasingly aware of their precarious state as compared to De La Salle's security within a prominent family and position as canon within the cathedral. If the schools failed, they had nothing. If the schools failed, De La Salle stepped back into his previous life. De La Salle took this to heart and through his thoughtful discernment abandoned his life to the will of God in decisive actions cutting his ties to earthy security and fully committed himself to his call.

First, De La Salle resigned his position as canon and all the rights, income, and privileges it provided to him. Regarding his personal wealth, rather than endowing the schools (which he believed were endowed by God) he distributed all his wealth to the poor and needy during the famine in the winter of 1683-1684. “Yet when it was all over, De La Salle reminded his community that, through it all and relying now on Providence alone, they had never lacked the basic necessities.” (Salm, 40) He and the “brothers” had abandoned themselves to the goodness and faithfulness of God.

“It was at this point, most probably at Easter in 1680, that De La Salle decided to invite the schoolteachers into his own home for meals. This would give him a chance to work a bit more closely with them to help overcome their deficiencies. In later years, it was this date that was selected to mark the foundation of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools by John Baptist de La Salle.” (Salm, 33) Thus De La Salle's own involvement continued to deepen as he recognized he was committing his life, as witnessed by his renewed call and vision, in association with others to meet the needs of educating poor boys in Reims and wherever invited if at all possible. And so, with direction by his spiritual advisor, Father Barre, De La Salle brought the teachers into his own home to live and work. We pay a price to follow a call, to include others in a dream. This decision came at a high cost to him, “He was fully aware of what it would cost him by way of opposition from the family, shock in the social and ecclesiastical world in which he moved, and the need to defer or put aside forever other ambitions he may have had for himself.” (Salm, 36)

The beginning years were particularly fragile. Teachers came and teachers left. “De La Salle did nothing to stop those who wished to leave, in fact, he actively encouraged some of them to do so once he realized that they were unfit for either teaching or community life.” (Salm, 38)
Abandonment is a two-edged sword. It cuts two ways. One can trust in the faithfulness or “will” of God or one can bail-out when times are challenging or one is “called” in a new direction. Abandonment is a both-and. The history of the brothers, the history of all Lasallians reflect this truth. More poignant, perhaps in the early days it remains our story as schools have opened and closed, new ventures take the place of old ventures.

De La Salle and two brothers in 1688 were invited to the parish of St. Sulpice in Paris extending the ministry of the brothers beyond Reims. Yet schools were opened and closed as De La Salle encountered the Writing Masters whose students numbers dwindled as the brothers accepted everyone and not just the poor listed on parish rosters. The Writing Masters took their issues to court and “this hostility, in suits, harassment, and even violence would continue in Paris for at least the next fifteen years.” (Van Grieken/Gray)

Men would join the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools enabling the brothers to take on ministries. Men would leave and at times cause a ministry to close. Money from parishes or benefactors would allow a ministry to open and when funds were not available for a variety of reasons, a school would be closed. De La Salle never wavered in his belief in the providence of God. The challenges facing the brothers both internal and external would take its toll on De La Salle but with faith and zeal he would be faithful to his call and the will of the brothers.

In 1691, De La Salle, Nicolas Vuyart, and Gabriel Drolin, took what is now called the “Heroic Vow” in which they vowed to be faithful to their vocation and be able to depend on one another no matter what others would decide or what would happen to the Institute.

The Brothers of the Christian Schools continued to grow, though not without challenges. They continued to experience legal action from those who challenged the “free schools” and financial as benefactors were not always faithful to their commitments. De La Salle wondered if his presence hindered the continuation of the Institute, would it continue after he was gone? Several times he would absent himself in travels or retreats having the brothers be responsible for themselves and their ministries. “In the face of all the opposition, De La Salle began to blame himself. Maillefer quotes from De La Salle’s journal, “I was convinced that my absence would calm my enemies and inspire them to think positively about my spiritual children.”

In 1714 he took an extended retreat to Parmenie conversing with Sr. Louise. She hoped he would remain as spiritual director at the hermitage. While on retreat he received a letter from the body of the Society. In his absence, several issues arose which were not able to be solved by the superior, Brother Barthelemy. The
letter, written by the directors and principal brothers of Paris on April 1, 1714 ordered him to return in virtue of the vow he had made to the body of the society.

"Monsieur, our very dear Father: We, the principal Brothers of the Christian Schools, having in view the greater glory of God as well as the good of the Church and of our Society, consider that it is of the greatest importance that you return to the care and general direction of God's holy work, which is also your own, because it has pleased the Lord to make use of you to establish it and to guide it for so many years."

De La Salle returned to Paris in August greeting the brothers, “Well, here I am. What do you want of me?” Returning to the brothers allowed him to give his blessing to the legacy which was to follow. De La Salle, at the request of the brothers wrote the definitive revision of the Rule, saw the election of Brother Barthelemy as the new Superior, and the purchase of St. Yon which housed the novitiate, a boarding school, and a juvenile center.

A life of faith and zeal took its toll on De La Salle. He died at the age of 67 on Good Friday, April 7, 1719. “At about midnight De La Salle broke into a cold sweat and entered into an agony which lasted until half past two the next morning. He then recovered slightly and, at the suggestion of one of the brothers, invoked the Virgin Mary in the concluding prayer: Mary, Mother of grace…receive us at the hour of our death. When asked by Brother Barthelemy whether he accepted his sufferings, the Founder replied, “Yes, I adore in all things the guidance of God in my regard.” These were his last words.” (Salm, 188)

We, as Lasallians, are part of this legacy. Throughout the Lasallian story we find ourselves called, we join in association with others and together we help shape the vision as we reflect upon the signs of the times. The conclusion of the rule, written for the Brothers, in essence is written for all of us:

The life of our Institute, along with the updating of its mission, constitute a never-ending series of creative acts inspired by fidelity, which at times, call for difficult commitments, as John Baptist de La Salle himself experienced.

Today, the Founder still calls to us, continuing to inspire and support all men and women who identify with him. Imbued with the spirit he bequeathed to us, and with the Partners who share our mission, we remain faithful to the living tradition of the Institute. In communion with all those who preceded us, we continue to respond with burning zeal to the calls of the Lord, of the Church, and of the world, to give glory to God. (Rule of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, 2015, #160)

Brother Luke Salm sums up these words by saying, “In these words, the life of a man who lived more than 300 years ago, and left as his legacy an Institute that has been a force for good ever since, becomes a challenge for the future. That future is in the hands of God who De La Salle himself often addressed in these words: Domine, opus tuum – Lord, the work is yours. (Salm, 206)

Yes, I adore in all things the guidance of God in my regard.