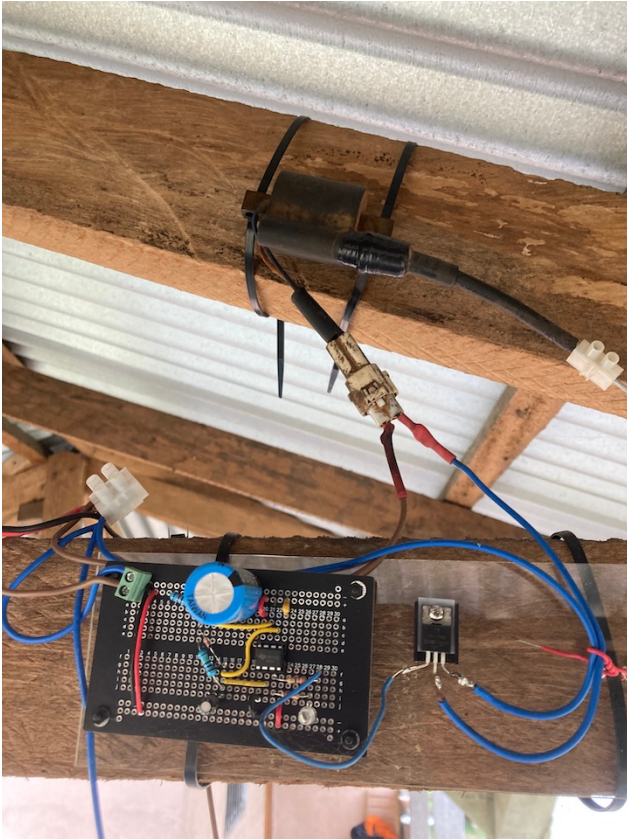


TRYING SMALL

Brian Palmer – ELCA Pastor/Missionary serving in Totota, Liberia



It's Alive!

I can think of three times in my working lifetime when I felt completely overwhelmed by the magnitude of the task in front of me:

1. Circa 1995, I was working as an engineer in Lynchburg, Virginia. I was writing code to support tritium production in commercial nuclear reactors, and I remember spending the Christmas break alone in my dimly lit cubicle, tip-tap-typing away.
2. Holy Week circa 2005 when I was serving Prairie Faith Partners in Western Iowa, and several people died. I distinctly remember

spending one entire morning pathologically cleaning my office as a way of avoiding reality.

3. These past few months as I've been trying to do all that is necessary to breathe life into the Totota Campus of the Lutheran University of Liberia.

In September, we started our first semester with a total of eight students: six in the College of Theology and two in the College of Education. Eight sounds a bit weak, but I have been working overtime, putting processes in place for registration, hiring faculty, guaranteeing adequate facilities, etc. My hope is that the work I put in now will pay dividends in the future as enrollment picks up.

Having more students in the College of Theology is exactly the opposite of what I expected and certainly the opposite of what I expect in the future. There is a significantly greater need for teachers in Liberia than for pastors. I attribute the overall low enrollment and the inverted distribution between the colleges to Liberians being rightfully skeptical of the new campus. I believe that once word gets out about the quality of our education, enrollments will increase exponentially.

The theme of what I am trying to do in Totota is to offer "Honest Education." Most of what happens in Liberia involves teachers pretending to teach and students pretending to learn, with everyone pretending the degree granted actually means something. My time as an instructor for the Lutheran Church in Liberia and the United Methodist University has convinced me that most students have a deep thirst for knowledge and are eager to soak up honest education whenever it is

offered. A few don't like it; they prefer the cheating and corruption that wallows in ignorance. The majority, however, love it.

I estimate the probability of success in achieving honest education at a fully functioning Totota Campus with several hundred students to be maybe 15 to 20%. Today, the small size makes it easy to manage. I feel sure that once we add sufficient students and faculty, the slippery slope leading to pretense at the expense of substance will become steeper. I wonder if this might be part of what Jesus meant by the narrow path leading to life?

My Take on the Election

Social media is driven by algorithms designed to maximize interaction and the algorithms have figured out that most humans are compelled by information that evokes strong feelings.

Goats

In 2005, I spent a morning cleaning my office as a way of avoiding the job in front of me. These past few months, I did something similar when I took a couple of days to help a friend make an electric fence to contain some goats. For those of you who are electronically literate, I used a 555 timer circuit to send short pulses through a motorcycle ignition coil, which in turn would send short bursts of very high voltage into the wire of the fence.

After making the circuit, I left it running in my house for a few days to ensure it could run continuously without overheating, etc. However, my problem was that I needed to test it. The fence needed to be painful but not cause any injury. I didn't want to touch it, yet I also didn't want to deploy it without touching it.

Thankfully, God provided a way forward: one morning, while scrounging around in the dark, I forgot it was there and I touched it. The good news is I was not injured. The better news is that I let out a string of curses that I don't think I've ever uttered before. It hurt...a lot!

The fence has been deployed, and it works.