

Ants

John and Fiona Earle

"Go to the ant thou sluggard, consider her ways and be wise" Proverbs 6.6

By itself, an ant cannot achieve very much, but a whole nest of ants is a very different matter. Just compare the height of the structures that humans have built without mechanical help and without the use of steel girders with the height of the structures that ants can build.

The Norman cathedrals come to mind as some of our tallest buildings – maybe 200-250 feet to the top of the spire. This is the combined height of 40 people. In our garden there is an ants' nest that is well over 40 ants high and in Nepal we have seen termites' nests that stood well over six feet high.

The great difference between ant and human behaviour is that we have a management structure that controls much of our lives and ants work things out in completely different ways.

In building the cathedrals, there were certainly master masons and master glaziers. Nowadays we seem to have an epidemic of management. There are the managers we have had for many years – such as Boards of Governors, officers in the armed forces or police, presidents or chairmen of companies, film and company directors. They seem to have been joined by many assistant managers and under managers that come in layers.

In the nest

Let's go and have a look at an ants nest early one morning. A patroller ant has gone out for a 'look-see'. He comes back and touches antennae with a forager ant that is still in the nest. By the use of pheromones – a scent that can be detected in minute proportions – the forager knows that the patroller is "one of us" in the same way that we can recognise someone wearing the old school tie or football scarf as "one of us".

If ten or more scouts touch the forager within about ten seconds then the forager knows that the coast is clear and there is no hungry lizard a few feet away. So the forager sets off, and if you multiply this up by a hundred times or so, you get an idea of what is happening in the nest. The ants are observing and reacting to local events – this sequence is called "Swarm Intelligence".

The original ants go off in little parties and one group will be lucky – or careful – and find a really good supply of food and bring it into the nest. Others will see that they are the most effective line and join in; and so you may see two streams of ants: one leaving the nest and the other returning with the food.

When there are too many bees in a hive, they behave in a similar way. Some scouts go out and find four or five possible sites for a new nest. They go back to the hive and collect some more scouts. This turns into a "first past the post" situation; the second group of scouts inspect the possible sites and either stay or move on. As soon as about fifteen or twenty bees agree on a new site they go back to the original hive and somehow convey the idea "we've got it folks" and about half the hive goes off to the new site.

Do we do anything similar? Well, yes. If you are looking for a restaurant and pass one or two that are empty you are likely to carry on and go in the one that is nearly full – unless you know the other restaurants already. The same thing is true of the dance floor.

When John was in General Practice and a new drug came on the market, he wouldn't hurry to prescribe it but would wait – watch for reports from other doctors. When we told a German girl who was staying about this, she laughed and said "typical ant behaviour."

Antland and England

John recently wanted to buy a new pen. One that could be re-filled with ink, with a

medium-broad nib – and he had money to pay for it.

In Antland, there would have been a quick response. Touch antennae – give the customer what he wants – touch antennae – take the money and make a quick profit – touch antennae of buyer ant to order a replacement. Everyone is happy.

But this was England. John found the right department in the appropriate shop. He was told pens were “over there” and found shelves of them with bottles of ink at the bottom. Things looked promising. Hold on! All the pens needed cartridges, not ink from a bottle. An attendant came over and explained that John could buy a converter that would allow (graciously permit) one to use ink.

“OK. Could I have one please?” “No. We haven't any in stock.” “Could I order one then?” “No. We get three deliveries a week. We don't know what's coming. It is all done by computer.”

This was said with pride; we are modern, up-to-date, computerised. We realise you are still in the quill pen era, but we are too polite to say so.

“I feel in a no-win situation. If you don't sell me a converter, how can you tell the computer to get another one?” “We should get one within a week.”

The future

Although we don't use ant behaviour much for ourselves, we are training robots to act like ants. Robots have been taught to inspect the blades of a turbine to check them for flaws AND to tell one another “I've looked at that blade. It's OK so you needn't bother.”

Hopefully, hopefully, hopefully, we might be able to make some really cheap robots that will check out an area for land-mines and if one goes off, then it is only a robot and not someone's life or legs. For use in Afghanistan and Cambodia for a start.

Our thanks to Peter Miller of the National Geographic who provided a clear explanation of the behaviour of ants.

Do you have a will?

For nearly five hundred years the Church of England has encouraged its members to keep their wills up to date. The Book of Common Prayer instructs clergy to remind those who are sick: *“let him be admonished to make his Will, and to declare his debts, what he oweth, and what is owing unto him; for the better discharging of his conscience, and the quietness of his Executors. But men should often be put in remembrance to take order for the settling of their temporal estates, whilst they are in health.”*

Every year many thousands of people die without leaving a will. This can cause unnecessary complications for their families and friends, and can often mean that their wishes are not carried out. Making a will and keeping it up to date is often a simpler and less expensive process than is often imagined.

For many people, leaving a gift to the church in their will is a final opportunity to say “thank you” to God for his blessings to them and to help the development of the church family.

In the light of this the PCC has reviewed and confirmed its policy on legacies:

The policy of the PCC is to use legacies to help fund significant development projects in the parish, whether buildings, equipment or staff. As circumstances change over the years, it may not be possible to fulfil specific donor requests, so church members are encouraged to leave gifts in their wills for the general purposes of the parish. The PCC will discuss with executors the most appropriate use of the gift in the light of current projects and the donor's known areas of interest in the church (e.g. children & youth, music, buildings).