Jesus set out a radical manifesto for redeemed relationships in the Sermon on the Mount. This series calls for a relationships revolution - fuelled by love. A bold vision for a different Northern Ireland built on strong and just relationships. It involves everyone in society, from individuals to churches and government.

*We dare to see Northern Ireland as a world-leader – a place where broken things are given the opportunity to be made whole and where relationships grow healthier, stronger and deeper.*
The first bond of society is marriage.

Marcus Tullius Cicero (106-43 B.C.)

This basic relationship has remained a constant in our ever changing world. Yet today marriage is so revolutionary that our culture seeks to redefine it.

The pattern is set in the first chapters of Genesis, “That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united with his wife, and the two become one flesh.” (Genesis 2) Marriage is a covenant relationship between one man and one woman for life to the exclusion of all others:

Covenant...
Marriage is not just a legal contract that can be easily ended when one party breaches their terms or conditions. It transcends the constructs of our law and culture.

One man and one woman...
This essential relationship is now perceived as a threat to the current artificial and shallow understanding of equality and diversity.

For life and to the exclusion of all others...
It’s a commitment centred around fidelity, monogamy and selflessness. These principles sit in direct contrast to the casual sex culture which is in a tiresome pursuit of instant gratification.

Marriage is not simply about two people coming together, but about the commitment of two extended families. Any resulting children don’t simply have two parents, but potentially four grandparents and numerous aunts, uncles and cousins, all of whom can provide relational support.
Marriage is vital
Strong marriages will continue to build strong communities and increase the wellbeing of all in society. Marriage and families are extremely important to the UK: there are 3 million family businesses providing employment for an estimated 9.5 million people, generating £1,065 billion turnover and contributing £73 billion to total tax revenue. Our economy depends on marriage and families. Yes, some marriages will fail and not everyone will get married but it remains a vital part of our culture.

The church in Northern Ireland has a strong heritage of encouraging and sustaining marriage. Over 70% of all churches here offer marriage preparation courses and 70% of weddings still take place in church. In 2010 Evangelical Alliance, working with local churches, launched the Marriage Week survey which found the five most common issues affecting marriages to be:

1. Time and work/life balance
2. Parenting
3. Communication
4. Money
5. Sex

Encouragingly, the survey also found that more than 30% of all churches offer marriage enrichment courses designed to address these issues. It’s clear that churches make an invaluable investment in local communities by helping to form and sustain strong marriages and families.

Marriage Myth-Busting
We hear lots of myths about marriage; here are the facts.

1. Young people aren’t interested in marriage.
**Myth** - 89% of young people still want to get married.

2. Less people are getting married.
**Myth** - marriage rates are actually rising in Northern Ireland. There were 8,366 marriages in 2011 – an increase of 3% on the previous year. Divorce rates continued to fall in 2011 with 2,343 divorces granted. By comparison, only 89 civil partnerships were formed in 2011.

3. Cohabitation is as stable as marriage.
**Myth** - Only 48% of cohabiting couples are still together by their child’s fifth birthday compared to 92% of married couples.

4. Marriage has no real benefits.
**Myth** - Married people live longer, healthier, happier lives. They are far less likely to suffer psychological illness. Married men earn between 10 and 40 percent more than single men with similar education and job histories.

5. Marriage makes no difference to children.
**Myth** - Studies consistently indicate that children raised by two happily and continuously married parents have the best chance of developing into competent and successful adults. Children whose parents marry and stay married are more likely to have stable marriages themselves and to wait until marriage to become parents.

6. Cohabitation has replaced marriage.
**Myth** - 75% of those under 35 currently in cohabiting relationships want to get married. In 2012 there were 18.2 million families in the UK, 12.2 million of which were married couples.

7. Most marriages end in divorce.
**Myth** – Two thirds of first marriages survive until one partner dies. The average length of a marriage in Northern Ireland ending in divorce in 2010 was 18.1 years, significantly longer than the UK average of 11 years.

References:
- www.marriagefoundation.org.uk/Web/
We are the revolution
a radically simple every day every body way of life.

Marriage is under threat
The once accepted norm and sanctity of marriage is being eroded by:

Changing values – rising individualism has questioned whether life long commitment in a covenant relationship is sustainable.

Liberal divorce laws - no fault divorce laws reduce legal support for lifelong commitment and undermine social norms that encourage cooperative behaviour in marriage. The state moves from the protector of marriage to the facilitator of divorce.

Cohabitation – More people than ever are sliding into cohabitation without the commitment of marriage (see #RR4 booklet).

Common-law marriage – there is no such thing in Northern Ireland. But moves to confer the rights of marriage on those who have not actively consented to the marriage union and undergone a public ceremony undermines social recognition of this union and the place of marriage as an institution in society.

Lack of relationship education – as breakdown increases there are fewer role models of successful marriage and more education will be needed.

Long/atypical work hours - couples have difficulty finding time to spend together and with their children.

Redefinition - The government’s proposals for redefinition are ill considered. Same-sex marriage is an oxymoron; marriage cannot be so profoundly redefined or else it becomes something else entirely. If marriage is turned into a sex-neutral institution there will be a huge loss of relational capital and social cohesion.

* What if… as a subversive act of conscientious objection, couples chose not to get ‘married’ in the eyes of the state at all? Would/could the church accommodate such radical ‘obedience’? What if already-married couples sent back their marriage certificate to the government in protest? This would have radical ramifications for Christians, the church, government and society, but is there the opportunity to creatively reclaim a biblical understanding of marriage?