

The editor interviewed Andrew and Kay about their firstborn son Peter, who was stillborn on 2nd February 1986.

When did you first realise there was a problem?

Kay: On 6th January, when I was 33 weeks pregnant. The baby was due on 24th February. I only had two hospital appointments, one for a scan and one towards the end of my pregnancy. My family doctor looked after me throughout my pregnancy, but I wasn't very happy with his care.

When I arrived at the hospital for my appointment, the midwife immediately spotted there was a problem just by looking at me; I was abnormally large for the week of pregnancy I was in. The midwife examined me and found the baby's heartbeat to be very slow. After speaking with the consultant, they arranged for me to have a scan straightaway and sent me to another hospital in an ambulance. They also rang Andrew, who worked as a nurse at the hospital, so that he could be with me during the scan.

The scan revealed various problems: the baby was very small, had a cyst on his brain and a very slow heart beat. I had gross polyhydramnios, which means I had far too much fluid in my womb. My family doctor had completely missed these problems. I had seen him a few days before, and he had said everything was progressing normally.

The hospital kept a close eye on me for the remainder of my pregnancy. We were warned that the baby would probably be born prematurely. I was thankful for a lovely, motherly midwife who gave us straight answers. While we knew things were badly wrong, it was she who warned us that the baby would probably not survive labour.

How did you feel when you first heard the news?

Andrew: I felt a bit lost. There was so much uncertainty. We just knew something was wrong. I simply wanted to be there for Kay.

Kay: Devastated. I had gone along thinking everything was okay. Although I had not felt the baby moving much, I was not worried and my family doctor kept reassuring me that everything was normal. As this was my first pregnancy I had nothing to measure it against. I felt a bit cheated. I had a

constant daily reminder right there in front of me. I prayed for healing and that the next scan would be different; I was having scans every week.

I felt as though I was in a very dark tunnel, but there was a light far off at the end of it – at some point in the future I knew things would be okay. I never doubted that God was in control and that helped me. He was my hope in despair.

One of the difficult things was that nobody - friends and family - knew what to say or do.

What happened during labour?

Kay: I had an epidural because the staff did not want me to go through any pain in the circumstances. After my waters broke, I trickled water for hours.

Andrew: The midwife had great difficulty trying to find the baby's heartbeat. She called the registrar in, who spent about ten minutes trying to find it. I remember her turning to us and saying gently, 'I think we can assume the baby has probably died'.

Kay: I'm glad that we didn't have to make a decision of whether or not to turn off a life support machine. We had prayed that God would take any decision like that out of our hands. And He did.

Andrew: There were loads of doctors and midwives on hand just in case. They were very supportive.

Kay: One midwife who wasn't aware of our situation, popped her head around my cubicle and said cheerily, 'Is everything all right in here?' She must have felt terrible because as soon as she saw us, it was clear that everything was not all right – we both had tears streaming down our cheeks.

What happened when Peter was born?

Kay: It sounds silly to say it, but I was shocked when I gave birth to a baby. He was very small and they rushed him straight to the other side of the room where they set about trying to resuscitate him. It wasn't long before they wrapped him up and asked if we wanted to see him. Andrew held him. I couldn't. I knew that if I did I might not be able to give him back. I couldn't take my eyes off his little face. We took a photo of him and gave him the name Peter.

It was Sunday tea-time, about 5.30 pm. Our minister rang the ward to see how we were and find out how the church could pray for us during the evening service. Neither of us was in a fit state to talk to him, so the midwives explained what had happened.

That night Andrew and I were given a double room on the ward so that we could be together. It was kind of the staff, but difficult for us because we were on the maternity ward and could hear newborn babies crying.

How did you feel?

Andrew: We wanted a child, we produced a child, but we didn't get the child. That left us feeling empty.

Kay: Although it's rather a cliché, we had empty arms.

Andrew: It was important having a funeral and having a grave to visit. Then two days later, we lost Kay's grandfather.

Kay: We had just arrived home from the hospital. I was still in my coat when the phone rang with the news about my grandfather. We had Peter's funeral and the next day, my grandfather's funeral. We cried loads at my grandfather's funeral, probably because the spotlight was off us and we felt free to grieve.

How did you feel afterwards? How did you cope through the grieving process?

Kay: I didn't do grieving very well because people didn't know how to help us through it. Peter's birth and death seemed to be a taboo subject – and still is. Neither of our families talked about it, although they both came to his funeral.

I was off work for six weeks, which was the maternity cover allowed for a stillbirth, and then I returned. I was a teacher. With hindsight, I shouldn't have gone back so soon. It wasn't long before I got laryngitis – I'm sure it was related to the trauma of losing Peter. I was desperate to appear normal; I didn't want to end up having to see a psychiatrist or needing medication or anything.

Having our daughter Joy thirteen months later made a difference. People suddenly seemed to feel safe talking about Peter.

Andrew: I had horrendous flu afterwards. It's the only time in my life I've had flu. And again, I think it was a reaction to losing Peter.

Kay: I asked my consultant for a copy of Peter's post mortem. He was reluctant to give it to me at first, until I explained that I had so little of this baby that I wanted everything I could have.

We formally complained about the way my family doctor had handled things, and we changed doctor.

I felt lost.

Andrew: I tried to be there for Kay... but maybe she was there for me? Life had changed; but every time I stepped out of my house, I found that work, church, shopping, and the petrol station were still normal parts of life.

It was painful. The pain isn't less for a Christian, it's just different. You hurt because of your loss, but your loss is Heaven's gain. It's a mixed-up emotion from that perspective. I think it's very hard for men to talk about it.

How long after Peter before you felt able to try and conceive again?

Kay: We wanted to try straight away for another baby, but felt we had to wait until we'd had genetic counselling. We were told there was a 1:40 chance of it happening again. For most people it's a 1:60 chance of having a handicapped or stillborn baby.

Where do you think Peter is?

Andrew: I have no doubt that Peter is in Heaven. I get my confidence from King David, who when he lost his little son who had been conceived in adultery, said: 'I will go to him one day, but he cannot return to me'¹.

Kay: I believe Peter is in Heaven. 'Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?'².

How do you feel now about Peter?

Kay: Peter's eighteenth and twenty first birthdays were hard. But I don't try to imagine what he might have done or anything. I don't think it's helpful.

Andrew: I reflected on the day of Peter's birth and at his funeral but I don't have any thoughts on what he might be like now.

What was the hardest thing?

Kay: No one knows what to say or do. It was a taboo subject. So they ended up not doing or saying anything. I know that people prayed privately, or I couldn't have gotten through it, but we were never prayed for publicly. We just needed to talk, but there was no one to talk to. We felt very alone in our grief.

At Peter's funeral, the hardest thing was seeing the tiny white coffin in a man's arms, and then lowered into the grave.



How did you feel during future pregnancies?

Kay: I felt okay most of the time. Because of what had happened with Peter I had scans every month and an open appointment with my consultant when I was pregnant with our second child, Joy. I found the scans very stressful. Thankfully, Andrew was usually able to be with me during the scans because he worked at the hospital.

I had mild post-natal depression after having Joy. I felt like I'd been pregnant for two years. I spent a lot of time cuddling Joy, but I struggled with a lack of sleep.

We have three children (Joy, Stephen and Suzy), and all of my pregnancies have been stressful because of what happened with Peter. I also had a miscarriage between Stephen and Suzy.

What are some of the things you have learned through this?

Andrew: Grieving for a newborn is very lonely. The parents are the only ones who know him or her. It's different from grieving for an adult who is known by others.

Kay: I would have liked a hand or foot print. I think hospitals do that now; they didn't when we had Peter.

Andrew: Our families saw Joy as the first grandchild, but really it was Peter. That was hard.

Kay: You don't ever get over losing a baby; you just learn to live with it. Even though people didn't know what to say to us, I valued the people who prayed for me and who sent cards. (I would have exchanged all those cards and letters for one birth congratulations card.) One person told me she didn't know what to say but gave me a small gift, which was thoughtful.

¹ 2 Samuel 12:15-25.

² Genesis 18:25.

This is Andrew and Kay's story and expresses their personal opinions.