

Liesl Kranich's story, written between January, 2006 and March, 2008, partly directed to Campus Crusade for Christ staff moms and partly as a personal record of experiences.

My Infertility Journey

When I got married I was excited about the fact that one day I would have a family. I assumed, since my mom never had a problem having children, that I wouldn't either. As I waited for months for my husband to give us the okay to try, I was in "rev" mode, all ready to race out of the starting gate.

I had it all planned out how we would maximize our chances and have a baby in the "right" time of year. These efforts made my disappointment more intense as the months passed with no baby, and, we learned, less than positive indicators for fertility. I was so unhappy, not only because of not having a baby and fearing that I wouldn't, but also because I had put parts of my life on hold, hoping to be pregnant. I wasn't happy in my ministry either, but rather than work on that, I just kept hoping to get pregnant, knowing that would "solve" the problem.

I was one month away from asking to see a specialist when the miracle happened. Everything that normally wasn't right was that time, and we got our daughter Anja as a result. The wait has made me appreciate her even more as a gift from God, since He had made it clear to me that I had no control over the matter.

As a result of this time (and the difficult pregnancy that followed) we waited a couple of years before trying for a second child. This time we knew that this could take a long time. We also knew that God could say no. He had made me no promises and had every right to allow me to go through the process of trying to expand our family without a child as the outcome.

I had done a lot of growing up mentally and spiritually in the intervening years and wanted my behavior and reactions to be radically different from before. I wanted (and still do) to accept His will for my life in my heart, not just with my mind or my mouth. I wanted to trust that God loves me intensely and will only bring what is eternally good into my life, even if the temporal experience is hard or painful.

We had tried talking to our doctor about earlier intervention, but were given advice to "relax". That's fine if you aren't relaxed, but did nothing to help us. We really were relaxed this time! That didn't change my infertility. And as I aged I was noticing increased complications.

After a year and a half, we consulted an infertility specialist. First we had my husband checked, and he was fine. Then the doctor we began working with was encouraging and gave us hope that this could be easily resolved. I took my first round of oral medications (the lowest level of drug intervention) and found out that I get all the unpleasant side effects, and it still didn't resolve some of my problems.

This was when it hit home. I'm infertile. I could live my life happily ignoring it most of the time, but it was a time of grieving for me to have to go to doctors, take medications, follow step by step rules for the month, deal with side effects and still have things not work properly. I had to grieve over the fact that I wouldn't experience what other women do. I would never be able to just decide to have a family and have one. And I had to remind myself that I was choosing to pursue infertility treatment. No one was making me do this. I needed to reorient my thoughts and my heart to the truth that God loves me. God has given me a truckload of blessings already. Everyone has trials, so I don't need to compare my lack of something with someone else, because I don't know what hard situation they have that I don't. I also needed to remind myself that God would be with me, no matter what the outcome.

Due to some other issues, we had to change doctors almost immediately. I cried at the thought of losing months to the switch, when the office called with a last minute opening the very next week! The appointment went well and the doctor wanted me to have a dye test to see if my tubes were open. Amazingly enough I was able to have the test that afternoon. More amazingly, a by product of having this test is sometimes increased fertility. Another miracle happened!

Despite some spotting (that was resolved with hormone supplements), after two blood tests, they convinced me I was pregnant and not losing the baby. I had one day to feel that relief and the first pains hit. A few days later I was in the ER learning that I did indeed have an ectopic pregnancy (where the baby is in the fallopian tube) and I wouldn't be able to keep it. Two doses of cancer medication and two weeks later, the pain was so great that I went back to the hospital for surgery.

Physically this was a horrible experience. Emotionally it was painful and disappointing. Spiritually it was heartening. I had been choosing all this time to trust God, no matter what, but this was the first real test. The worst had happened and I could still believe in my heart that God is good and that he wasn't wasting my pain or my baby's life. I could trust Him.

As I'm writing this, I'm only three months removed from that experience. I'm also going through round two of grieving being in infertility treatments, because I want a child and don't want to go through all this to get it! The ectopic pregnancy has left scarring that makes me even more likely than average to have another one. So I go back to the beginning and remind myself that I need to enjoy and live my life to the fullest and not let this take over my heart (though it may take over my schedule in the near future).

This issue has been around so many years that it's been central in my thoughts as I've made ministry choices as well. From my first experience, I learned that I can't put my life and opportunities on hold waiting for a pregnancy. So, when we were about to begin trying for our second child I was challenged to be the wives' representative for our department. I was scared and insecure in general, but I was also concerned that in a few

months I wouldn't be able to continue. But after the waiting so long the first time, I knew that I should give it a shot and do my best until such time as I couldn't continue.

That was two years ago and I have thoroughly enjoyed caring for our staff women. I've also been challenged to do things that scared me or that I didn't feel ready for (I'm easily scared☺), but I've learned to say yes unless there's a good reason not to (which sometimes there are, and I have, but fear alone isn't one of them), because God makes it happen His way and in His timing, even with my schedule as a mom.

In dealing with my infertility, I still don't know what the future holds. I don't know how much of a toll it will take on me physically and emotionally. I don't have a time table or a clue of the outcome. I do know that God has each day planned in advance with good works for me, whether I have a drug induced migraine, daily doctors' appointments or another hard pregnancy. He knows! He knows how He will use me each of those days, even if it's just to minister in some way to the doctors treating me.

I've even had a chance already to share my faith with another woman in my neighborhood who is also dealing with infertility. God doesn't waste anything and I pray He'll open my eyes to see the blessings and opportunities He brings my way. My job is to keep it from discouraging me and narrowing my focus to myself. Though I wish I didn't have this trial, I do see God's goodness in and through it and want to keep my heart thankful and open to His perfect and unique plan for my life.

I am adding my thoughts 14 months further down the road. The story continued with another surgery to remove the scar tissue and then months and months of increasing levels of infertility treatments. I started to wonder if there was a special category for someone who could manage to go a whole year of treatments without a pregnancy. It was draining physically, emotionally, financially and it was a huge time of desperately seeking God's guidance, especially after those around me could no longer relate and (well-meaningly) added to my pain by suggesting what they thought God might be wanting us to do or by questioning my walk with God in light of my emotions, among other things. We were coming to the end of the line and only had a few months of tries left, and so we were reconciling ourselves to the likelihood that we would not get another biological child.

Then it happened again. The required pregnancy test I took every month (and resented having to look at it each time) actually had a pink line. I'll spare you the enormous emotional outburst that followed and the weeks of build up where we found out that it was not ectopic and seemed to be doing great. I knew that something could still go wrong, but I wanted to be thankful for the miracle I was experiencing. And then it ended with an ultrasound showing a big, black hole, just an empty sac where the baby should have been. It felt like my world stopped that moment.

Unlike my previous loss, I did not feel heartened. My mind, praise God, has been put through quite a boot camp of believing what's true about God and so it went into action,

choosing as an act of the will to believe and to work hard to take every thought captive that would undermine my relationship with Him. My heart, however, screamed in the pain of barrenness again. People talk about wondering “why” God does these things. The answer to that, for me, brings no comfort. My babies are still gone from me. My heart felt like that black hole on the ultrasound. My mind knew me to be cared for and loved by my heavenly Father, while my heart wrestled with a myriad of emotions like betrayal and a sense of false hope. All these thoughts and prayers from the previous weeks had to be revisited and worked through all over again to put them in a context of truth and to reconcile my heart to that truth. The only thing that brings comfort is really knowing WHO my God is and that the things my emotions would tell me weren’t the truth. I had to get my heart to feel again what my head knew to be true (and boy does that take a lot of energy to do!). God loves me, more than I love my children. God is providing for me, just not the way I wanted. God is grieving with me. He’s not indifferent to the pain He had to bring. He would not bring it if there were another way. He’s not angry with me. I don’t need to understand why to believe my God is working on my behalf and for His glory.

If you’re in a situation like this, you may feel a bit like Job, with his well intentioned, but misguided counselors around. I sure did. It’s okay to actually “walk” with God. Faith in God doesn’t always look peaceful and composed. As I’ve worked through a bunch of Beth Moore studies on the Patriarchs and David and others, I’ve seen the greatest moments of faith seem to be times of turmoil, wrestling, intense sacrifice of your own will and control. Don’t worry about anyone’s opinion but God’s! You can be hurt with Him, angry, confused, even rebellious. Have it out with Him all you want, as long as you keep going to Him.

Faith is something to be hashed out over time and, I believe, over the painful battlefield of our hearts. It’s active and changing and must be worked at. It’s not something finished and easy all the time. Beth said of Jacob as he limped after wrestling with God, “Let the Esaus of the world run, I’ve met with God”. I would rather not be wounded at all, but if the choice is to stay a godless fool or really “Meet” with my maker, I’ll choose to stick with Him, knowing He’s the only one who can bind the wounds of my heart.

As Christian women, and Crusade staff, our world can revolve around church activity and friendships that add salt to our wounds. The reality is that very few people will ever really “get” what you’re going through. I’m amazed at how often people think the baby is the only issue, and once you get one, it’s all better. I’m here to tell you it’s not. That’s like reading a romance novel. Couple falls in love and rides away into the sunset. All the Indian attacks and drought and death in the pages before can be forgotten with the turn of a page. Infertility is the journey, not just the outcome, and it’s not a journey you have a choice about. You only get to choose how you handle it with God and with the options available. A happy ending does not lessen the pain and scars of the journey (which, on a positive note, can be a really good thing at times since I would not want to lose the benefit of the work God’s done in my heart through those wounds).

Our lives are full of commonplace conversations and activities, many of which still have to happen, that will cause us pain. It's like wearing different colored glasses. The whole world looks different to you. Baptisms, showers, kids' birthday parties, even praise and worship can be joyful for others and a sacrifice for you. I don't know what the average sized staff family is, but it can seem awfully large when you are the only one without 4-5 kids.

It's okay to hurt. Just take it to God instead of letting it turn into something that will isolate you even more. And it's okay to not do church nursery or other aspects of ministry that cause you pain. God has a place for you (and a time, not always right away) where you can reach out and minister as a part of his body.

I was just recently given a book called *Hannah's Hope, Seeking God's Heart in the Midst of Infertility, Miscarriage, and Adoption Loss* by Jennifer Saake (see www.hannahshopebook.com ; FamilyLife and some Christian bookstores also sell it). As I said before, you may not have anyone around you who can really understand where you are at, much less be able to be of comfort. Right after this last loss, I tried to explain to my Bible study what I was going through and how not to hurt me further. A week later, the leader of our group came to me with this book, saying, "I skimmed it and she's saying all the things you've been trying to tell us!"

That got my attention. I read and cried and prayed my way through that book until 3:30 in the morning. I can't tell you how wonderful it was to share my grief with Jennifer as she wrote my own thoughts and hurts and experience from her own life and from the many others she's helped over the years. She has been there and back again and so I knew she knew what she was saying and then could also learn from her journey of faith. A bonus about this book is that it's written not just for those experiencing these losses, but also for friends, family and churches who want to care for them and would like to better understand. I would highly recommend this book for you if you are grieving or love someone who is.

Once again, my journey is still ahead of me. More treatments, maybe a baby, maybe more heartbreak, maybe a seemingly closed door, but always with that niggling wonder if God will intervene. I pray for all of us to be given a stronger, heart-felt relationship with our loving Father, no matter how hard the journey.

Here is probably my last entry. It's now a year after the last time I wrote. I experienced different phases from the initial one of just wanting to get/be pregnant again as soon as possible, to the realization that it might not happen again, or worse yet, be another loss. By the time I was able to start up my last shot at treatment I just cried and cried the day before because emotionally and physically I knew what this had already cost me and what it could put me through again. I had learned that not being pregnant was not the worst thing that could happen. We had also decided that we could not go to the highest

level of treatment for those reasons—I just couldn't handle knowing I was losing babies if it didn't work.

The last of the three cycles was the hardest. I had narrowed down who was in my life for this window of time (though I'm really open about things, there comes a time when I could only take so much well-meaning input and concern on behalf of others), and so sent out a very select email to friends who had managed to be helpful in various ways. It was so necessary to have the prayer cover they gave. The irony of this time is how many people (including the doctors' staff) wanted me to "feel" optimistic. The day of my last insemination was for me so sad, because I knew this was the end and had no assurance of a surprise happening after years of things not working. I mention this because it's important to understand that people on the outside will want you to feel as they wish things to be, and will not understand how different living it is for you.

What did surprise me was the end. I had a good idea that the last round had not made a baby, and was mentally prepared, I thought. So when the day came, and I had to actually look at the negative pregnancy test, it shocked me how much it still felt like a death of a close relative. I was "okay" for a half an hour. Then I made the mistake of telling our daughter as she was heading out to school (I thought my husband had already talked to her) that it was over and there would be no more babies. She burst into tears and I held it together for her to calm her down, but when she left that began my wave of grief. All those phases of disbelief and shock and anger came.

When I could think, I concluded that somehow I had still been waiting for my "rescue" or my "happy ending". The Bible stories you cling to, even Job, have some consolation prize at the end for walking a hard road faithfully. You don't camp out on the ones where the only consolation comes in heaven or much, much later. I used to dislike Job's story, like a whole new set of kids replaces the lost ones. But once you have lost them, replacements would be greatly appreciated. Yet that's not what God had chosen for me. He chose the hard road solely for its purposes alone. At times, though we know God is good, that can be a very hard pill to swallow.

Despite this new wave of grief, I also had made a decision that I wanted to reclaim as much of life as I could and not let my valid grief rob me of blessings as much as possible. It had become so hard to celebrate others' babies, yet I used to be a baby hog. I wanted (and still do) to be able to be "normal" around people again and enjoy those things again. I'm not there yet, and have no idea what the end result will look like in my heart, but I'm making conscious choices, bit by bit, to be okay with and even hold new babies again.

One major change also happened during this time to help us through. We had been led by God to a major change in our jobs with Campus Crusade that would involve moving. Though this added stress, it also gave us something new and exciting to look forward to. It has required lots of activity for our days and much to occupy our minds. I don't recommend ignoring grief, but I would suggest finding things to engage you that will be new and hopeful while living through the end of another dream.

I will also say that accepting a “NO” is easier to live with after a while, than the uncertainty and trials of treatment. I am only four months removed from then and it is better, and I trust it will continue to improve with God’s help. This is not to say that I don’t still grieve, but not having to focus on it all the time, and not having to agonize over decisions, does lighten the burden of it all.

Last month is the anniversary of the loss of our last baby. I did grieve on occasion quite strongly, but not constantly. I cut myself slack when I need to walk out of a sermon that makes me cry or when I still skip a baby shower, or change a song on the radio. All this to say, moving forward and grieving will mix together and that’s healthy and good.

For those reading this who want to know what was and was not helpful for me, here are a few tips. After it was all over I encountered two reactions that weren’t helpful. One was trying to make me optimistic that God might still work a miracle. Any Christian woman is aware of that possibility, and if their friends would like to keep praying for them, great. But it’s just cruel to expect a person who is trying to accept their situation, which has been agonizingly prayed about for years and this IS God’s answer, at least for the time being, to try to keep living on a hope for which God has not promised anything. The flip side was that others wanted me to grieve more openly than I was. I reminded them I’d been living in a state of grief for years now between the steady grief of dealing with my infertility and my lost babies. I compared the last month with King David’s last week before his son died. He fasted and prayed and grieved until the son died, knowing God had said the boy would die, but also knowing that God sometimes shows mercy at the last minute. Once the boy was dead he dressed and ate again. My last month was that time of knowing loss is a certainty unless God chose to spare me at the last minute. Once it was over, it was time to accept the loss, remember the other blessings in my life and do my best to accept God’s will and live in a state of thankfulness – to receive what healing and consolation were offered.

So my suggestion is to offer very little input beyond things like “I love you, and I’m so sorry”, but be there. Be willing to listen, willing to do normal things with them, just be there on their terms (since people are so different, that will look very different from one person to another).

I have also learned that the new question I will hear word for word for the next few years is, “Have you ever considered adoption?” Once again, any infertile woman will know there are millions of children around the world needing a home, and may well have been given all kinds of info, welcome or not on the subject. You don’t need to ask that question. If they are considering it and want to talk about it, they will say so. If not, you don’t need to ask. Adoption is a wonderful thing, but it is not an easy road either nor is it even appealing for everyone. Please do not assume infertile people need to pursue this or provide unsolicited emails or information to couples.

To wrap this up, I am thankful for my husband and child, that I am a wife and a mom at all, and I can even be thankful for infertility on occasion. I have hated the experience and the loss, but I have loved reaping the fruits in my life that God has grown, things that

don't grow without pain and loss. I pray better for myself and others. I have more compassion than before. I'm less presumptuous of God regarding what He "owes" me. I am much more thankful for the blessings I do have. I understand grief now.

I will always be an infertile woman, which, contrary to popular opinion, is not a bad thing to be. It is one of the marks on my life of having lived in this fallen world. Just as a cancer survivor will have permanent changes in their perspective, being infertile gives me a different view of the world than most. The key is to letting God heal our wounds, use our scars (which will remain, and which is also a good thing), and grow new fruit from them. I hope that my ramblings on these pages are useful to others, that they show reality in light of our very real hope in God. God bless you in your journey.