



Photo by Roger Slater

Pastor Vivian Laird enjoys interacting with a toddler.

*Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

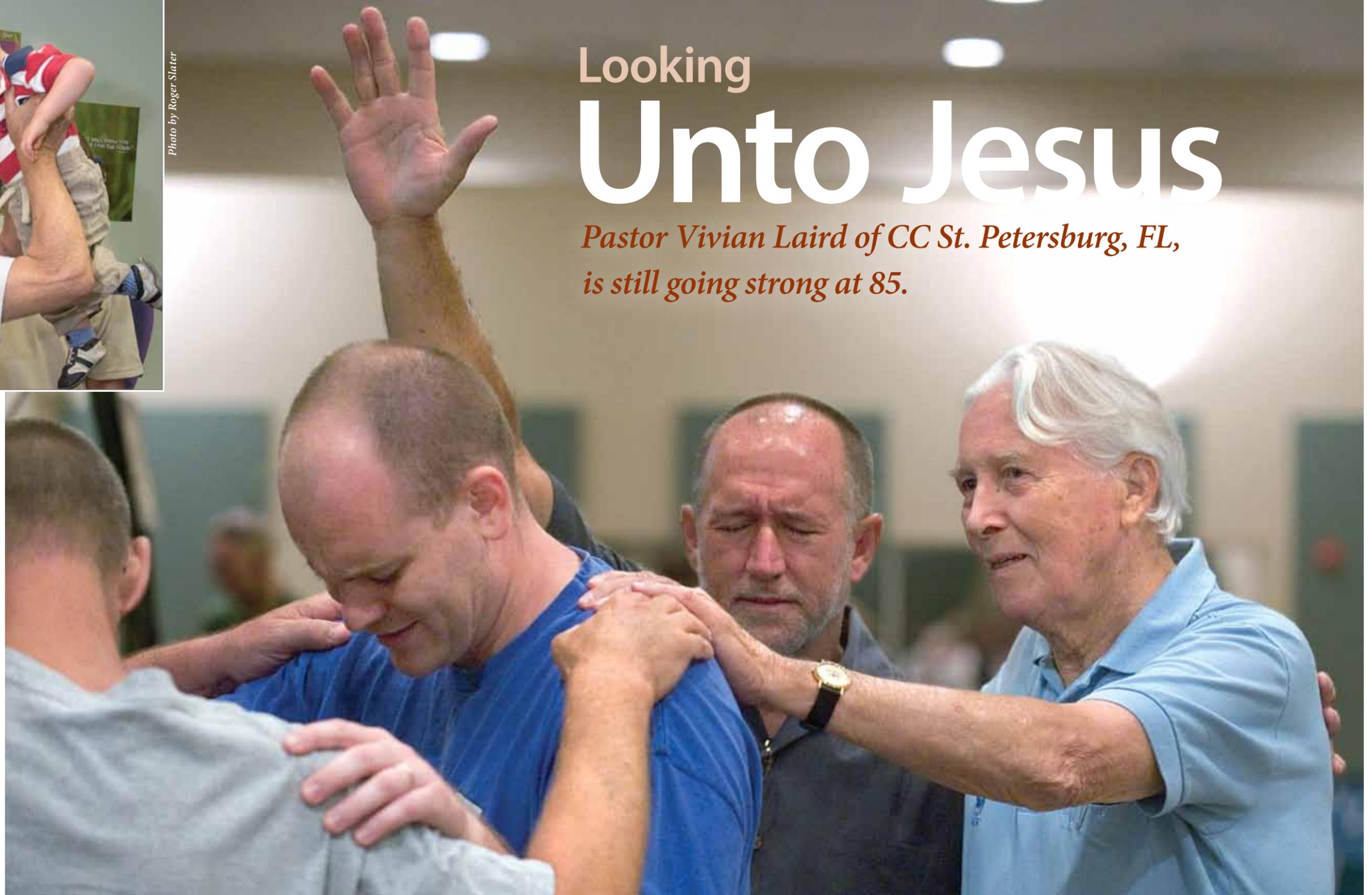
Story by Bob Makin  
Photos by Rob Moorman

As the ringtone of Pastor Vivian Laird's cell phone goes off in the midst of a staff meeting, several pastors jump up and dance to the Caribbean beat. At 85, Viv is lovingly teased about his mastery of his cell phone. It gets a lot of use, for he is head of the church's prayer chain. When people have a prayer request, their first call is often to this veteran prayer warrior.

"He'll be in the midst of prayer with someone, and someone else will call with a prayer request," said Pastor Danny Hodges, CC St. Petersburg's senior pastor. "When I see Viv, often the first words out of his mouth are, 'Bro, I was praying for you this morning.'"

"If you ever wanted someone praying for you, it's Pastor Viv," Danny continued. "This ministry would not be what it is without men like Viv Laird, no question about it."

At CC St. Petersburg, Viv works three days a week as pastor to the church's large ministry for senior citizens. The 40 seniors involved in the ministry are currently going through



Pastor Viv Laird, right, and Pastor Danny Hodges, second from right, pray for a member of the fellowship after a service. At 85, Viv continues to minister to all generations with the love of Christ.

the Book of Revelation. When asked, "How do you keep going?" Viv replies, "It's just grace, Bro. There's no retirement in ministry. There's just trust and obedience."

Viv joined CC St. Petersburg as their first missions pastor, serving for 12 years. He had

previously served as a missionary throughout Africa from 1956 to 1991.

Viv was born in Belfast in 1924 and raised in Bangor, Ireland. He came to the United States in 1950 through an invitation by Billy Graham to study at Northwestern College

# Looking Unto Jesus

*Pastor Vivian Laird of CC St. Petersburg, FL, is still going strong at 85.*

in Minneapolis, MN. Graham was the school president at the time.

Having accepted Jesus as Savior at the age of 14, Viv quickly became involved with Youth for Christ. Soon after, the Lord put a

passion for Africa in his heart through an annual mission convention.

"I went every year," Viv said. "I wouldn't miss it." Viv was delighted to find that he shared a passion for Africa with his future

wife, Marilyn, a nursing student he met at Northwestern in 1952.

"When I was saved, the Lord brought to my mind the realization that I could be a nurse in Africa," Marilyn said. Married in 1953, the Lairds left for the Sudan three years and

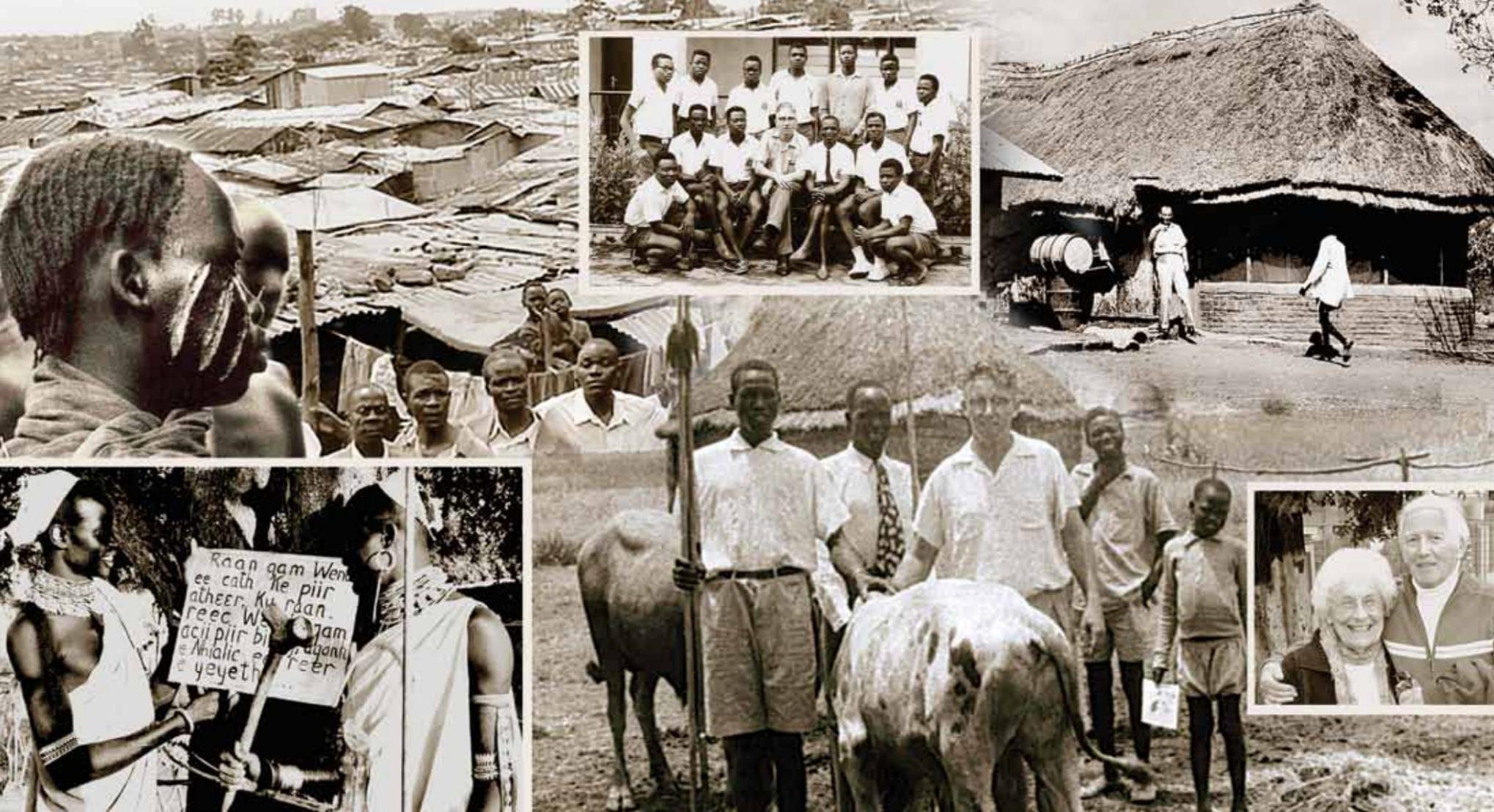


Photo collage of Viv and his wife Merilyn, who served as missionaries in Africa from 1956 to 1991. *Top center:* Viv with Kenyan students at a Bible Institute. *Upper right:* Viv and Merilyn's Sudanese home in 1963. *Bottom center:* Viv with livestock helpers. *Bottom left:* Tribesmen who became Christians. *Top left:* The modern sprawl of the slums.

two children later. "In the Sudan, we did pioneer work," Viv said. "The people were stark naked. We worked among three tribes: Dinka, Shilluk, Nuer. My wife ran a clinic there." Viv remembered treating tribesmen who suffered from scorpion bites in an unexpected way: electric shock treatment.

"We would use a distributor cap and put it on the site of the bite and then rev the motor," he recalled. "They would come in agony and go away smiling. We found out about it from an Australian missionary. The doctors made fun of it, but they use it all the time now because it works."

After having three more children, Merilyn relinquished her nursing duties to concentrate on motherhood and to support Viv's work as a teacher. God's impact through Viv on young Christians at a predominantly



Viv talks with Henry Robello after the Bible study he teaches for seniors.

***And now, here I am this day, eighty-five years old. As yet I am as strong this day as on the day that Moses sent me ...***

Joshua 14:10, 11



Vivian and his wife, Merilyn, enjoy playing with Reese White while he is held by his mom, Diana. Vivian and Merilyn have been married for over 56 years.

school every year in order to provide them with the best education.

"That was really sad," Merilyn said. "We would hate to see them go, and they would cry and cry because they didn't want to leave." But God has been faithful to the Laird family. Because of their parents' excellent example, all of the Laird children are walking with the Lord, as are most of their 16 grandchildren.

***Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.*** Hebrews 12:1

Nearly six years ago, Pastor Art Dykstra had the privilege of filling Viv's large shoes as CC St. Petersburg's missions pastor. "It's obvious to those touched by Pastor Viv that he is a man whom God has used mightily," said Art. "You look at his life and the things that have been influenced and changed by him, and it's profound. He is truly a man of the Word and prayer and relationships. If you have that combination, it's not hard to move forward when it comes to kingdom purposes."

Art's previous work required traveling around the world for a Florida-based missions service. He worshiped at CC St.

Petersburg when he was home. Then, he joined the church staff. Viv's influence on his ministry has been enormous, he said. When first on staff, Art was assigned Pastor Viv as a mentor. While rooming together at the Southeast Pastor's Conference, Art was impressed by the consistency in which Viv stayed in the Word and would fall on his knees in prayer before he went to bed. Art was also deeply impacted by the way Viv treats people, especially young people.

"He comes to them as a loving father would," Art noticed. "Young people are drawn to Pastor Viv because of his tenderness and kindness toward them. He's not judgmental but willing to mentor, guide, and accept them as they are and let the Word transform their lives as he spends one-on-one time with them."

On mission trips to Africa, Art has seen the fruit of Viv's impact firsthand. Several of the men Viv ministered to now oversee more than one church. "In Africa," Art reflected, "many guys had multiple wives. I was teaching on leadership to elders and one said, 'Brother, I have three wives. What am I supposed to do?' I'd never heard that question before. That's something that never came across my desk in Florida."

For wisdom, Art turned to Viv, who responded with 1 Timothy 3:12 and Titus 1:6, which state that a leader must have only one wife, but 1 Timothy 5:8 also says that he

must provide for his family. “He basically said that [the man] was responsible for his family and must not turn the other wives out on the street, but must choose one wife,” Art recalled. “He must still care for his family and meet those responsibilities or the women will turn to prostitution if he casts them out because they would have no hope of finding another husband. He was allowing the Lord to change the culture. That was the real wisdom in what he said.”

At CC St. Petersburg, young people are encouraged to glean wisdom by taking an older couple to dinner. Many have asked to dine with the Lairds, including Art and his wife of four years, Robin. “At the dinner, Viv said, ‘Bro, a woman is like a garden,’” Art recalled. “‘You have to cultivate it. You have to take the time to let it grow.’ Here’s this guy in ministry, but he made family his first priority. And he still has extremely close relationships with all his children because of that.”

Sometimes when Viv’s ever-present cell phone rings, it is his other half on the line. He responds, “Hey, lover.” Those are terms of endearment you would expect to hear from a 22-year-old fresh in love, Art said.

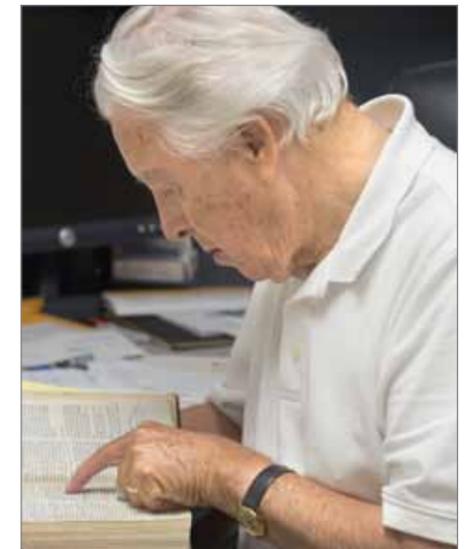
“It always gives me a lot of pleasure to hear Viv answer the phone that way,” he said. “It’s a blessing to see that model and consistency. The thing about Viv is that he is tempered and tried through time. They have gone through hard times, and they are consistent because of it. You get the same man on his knees praying in a hotel at a conference every night before he goes to bed, even if it’s 1 o’clock in the morning, spending time in the Word regularly, loving people, and consistent in his relationship with his 84-year-old wife.”

Merilyn described her union with Viv as a “wonderful marriage relationship.” Both comment that they are deeply in love, even after being married 55 years. “We pray together even to this day, and we read the Word together,” Viv continued. “I am amazed by the number of couples who don’t.”

Pastor Danny concluded, “Viv is a modern-day Caleb serving the Lord longer and more enthusiastically than anyone can imagine.” For Vivian Laird, whether as a husband, a pastor, or a cell-phone master, his life is for the Lord’s glory and by His grace. “God’s glory is the most important thing,” Viv said. “It’s all for His glory.” 🌿



Viv joins many in the congregation in prayer when an open invitation was given to come and bow before the Lord after a Sunday service.



Viv studies the Word of God in his office at CC St. Petersburg.

*“My servant Caleb, because he has a different spirit in him and has followed Me fully, I will bring into the land where he went, and his descendants shall inherit it.”*

Numbers 14:24



Viv’s heart for prayer, love for people, godly counsel, and quick humor allows him to minister to young and old alike.

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