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LeTourneau University music video pays tribute to Billy Graham, popular New Zealand Gospel song

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By Jordan Green



LeTourneau University senior Glory Griffin and Dr. Steve Elers, associate professor of communication, rehearse a dual-language hymn written in honor of Billy Graham's impact on New Zealand during a session in the Speer Chapel at the university on April 13, 2026. (Camryn Davis/LeTourneau University Photo)

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If you asked an American to name his favorite hymn, there's a good chance he'd pick "How Great Thou Art." The same goes for a New Zealander, who probably would pick "Whakaaria Mai," the native-language version of the American tune.

For decades, those hymns have been staples in Christian worship services in both nations, and their connection lies in the legacy of world-renowned evangelist Billy Graham – who had deep ties to Longview and LeTourneau University.

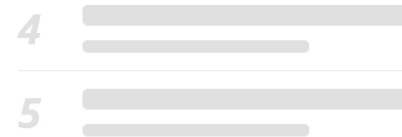
The story of how "How Great Thou Art" was translated into the Māori language and became a popular hymn there began in 1959.

In March, it seemed to come full-circle in Longview.

Dr. Steve Elers, an Anglican priest from New Zealand who became a communication professor at LeTourneau in 2025, teamed up with student and singer Glory Griffin to record a dual-language version of the hymns. In the weeks since the video was released, their rendition of "Whakaaria Mai/How Great Thou Art" has made headlines across New Zealand.

"In the Māori Anglican Church, I would say the clergy, especially older clergy, know the story," Elers said. "But people didn't know it, and I thought it'd be cool to put that out there. And it could be a good way to share the Gospel."

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Back in Longview, their recording has brought to light just how small the world really is.

What's in a hymn?

In 1959, Graham spoke to more than 160,000 people during his first crusade in New Zealand, and as he often did, he employed "How Great Thou Art" in his services.

Graham asked the Rev. Wi Te Tau Huata, an Anglican priest, whether there was a Māori-language version of the tune. There wasn't, so Huata and the Rev. Sam Rangiihu set out to create one.

The two priests took words from the last line of "Te Arika," a native translation of the hymn "Abide With Me," because the song had the same meter as "How Great Thou Art." Those were the words set to the music of "How Great Thou Art," and "Whakaaria Mai" was born, Elers said.

"It is well known throughout New Zealand, not just in the church context, but culturally," Elers said. "It's kind of like an anthem, I suppose you could say. And some people will sing 'How Great Thou Art' in English and then throw in 'Whakaaria Mai' or vice versa — all kinds of different styles."

The song gained major cultural popularity in the early 1980s, when Sir Howard Morrison had a hit with a bilingual recording of both tunes. The song's place in New Zealand's culture was solidified.

"A lot of people here know 'Amazing Grace,' and a lot of people there know 'Whakaaria Mai,'" Griffin said. "If someone were to start singing 'Whakaaria Mai,' everyone would just kind of join in and start singing."

As an Anglican priest in New Zealand, Elers was well acquainted with the tunes. In early 2025, he got a notification on social media platform LinkedIn that a Christian college in America, LeTourneau, was looking to hire a communication professor. He did some research and discovered Graham's long ties to the university and its founder, R.G. LeTourneau. He applied and got the job, and he saw an opportunity with it.

LeTourneau and Graham

LeTourneau and Graham have deep roots. Graham met R.G. LeTourneau and his wife, Evelyn, as a young man and struck up a friendship, according to a page on LeTourneau University's website dedicated to Graham.

In 1947, Graham was on tour in Europe and came up short on cash. At a later date, Graham was quoted in the Longview newspaper as saying: "When I was just starting out to preach, I didn't know anyone, and nobody knew me. I was in Ireland, and I needed some money and didn't know where I could get it. ...I just sat down and wrote Mr. LeTourneau and told him my problem, and you know what he did? He sent me a check for \$7,000."

A few years later, in 1953, LeTourneau put his engineering skills to work by building a large metal dome for Graham to use in England for an event, according to the university's website. The dome wasn't put to that use, however, because of problems with London city leaders. That structure ended up as one of the famous LeTourneau domes to dot the Longview plant where LeTourneau manufactured his earth-moving equipment.

LeTourneau became a college in 1961, and Graham served on its board of trustees from 1961 to 1975. In 1971, Graham hosted one of his Gospel crusades at Longview High School's Lobo Stadium. His son, Franklin, learned to fly at LeTourneau University.

And perhaps most fitting: When LeTourneau died in 1969, Graham sent vocalist George Beverly Shea to sing “How Great Thou Art” at his funeral.

“When I saw that connection, I was like, ‘Oh, cool,’” Elers said.

That’s how he got the idea to make something new out of it.

‘A cool reminder’

In the fall, Elers reached out to Dr. Jim Taylor, LeTourneau’s director of fine arts, to ask if he knew a student who would be willing and able to learn and sing the two songs. Taylor recommended Griffin.

Soon thereafter, Elers and Griffin began rehearsing. Elers played guitar, and Griffin sang.

“Once I heard the connections, I was like, ‘This is really, really cool,’” Griffin said.

“What I told [Elers] was like, ‘Only you could have made this connection.’ And I do believe that God is very intentional with those things. As a worship leader, someone who wants to work in ministry, it just was like, I’d be honored to sing this, to be a part of it.”

Griffin had to learn the Māori language, which came to her surprisingly easily. It was similar to Japanese, which she previously studied.

The two had a few rehearsals together before making the video recording in the university’s Belcher Center. Besides getting the music right, they wanted to get the message across tastefully and in a culturally appropriate way. Elers received the blessing of Anglicans in New Zealand during the project, and the response from New Zealanders has been overwhelmingly positive, he said.

He didn't expect the song to receive significant media attention, but news of the video made headlines at large news organizations in New Zealand, including the New Zealand Herald and NewstalkZB.

People have emailed Elers and said the song inspired them to return to church for the first time in a while, he said. Others said it brought tears to their eyes.

"Hopefully it's far-reaching and in good ways," he said.

Griffin concurs.

"The biggest picture for me is to share the Gospel in both cultures," Griffin said. "I think it might have more cultural significance to New Zealand, for sure. But I've gotten good feedback from my American people and friends that they just love it."

Griffin has wanted to visit New Zealand for years because of its natural beauty, she said. Now, she might have an opportunity to go. Elers and Griffin have had offers to perform in New Zealand, and the song is set to be broadcast on the Hope Channel across its global network at some point, Elers said. The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association gave approval for the broadcast, which features footage of Graham.

Griffin hopes the song, too, will be an inspiration for LeTourneau students.

"It is a cool reminder to this small Christian student body that we have really cool things in our heritage and name that are something to be proud of," Griffin said.

The song can be found on YouTube by visiting tinyurl.com/whakaariamai.



ABOUT JORDAN GREEN