

# Hidden hymn history: New film traces story of Whakaaria Mai

Project uncovers link to Billy Graham and its journey into Kiwi worship

Joseph Los'e

**A** newly released music video filmed in Texas tells the little-known story behind the Māori hymn *Whakaaria Mai*, revealing its historical connection to the late American evangelist Billy Graham.

The project was created by Dr Steve Elers, a Māori Anglican priest and academic from Palmerston North, who moved to America in July 2025 to become Associate Professor of Communication at LeTourneau University, an interdenominational Christian university in Longview, Texas.

The video features Texas student Glory Griffin, a student at LeTourneau University. She sings the hymn in te reo Māori and English, accompanied by Elers on guitar.

Elers said the project included guidance from leaders such as Wai-kato and Kingitanga historian Mamae Takereti, Sir Eddie Durie – the first Māori judge – Reverend Dr Wayne Te Kaawa, a former lecturer in theology at Otago University and Ngāti Kahungunu Iwi leader Bayden Barber. The project, Elers said, was a tribute to Billy Graham while also recognising the Māori clergy who shaped the hymn's history.

During Graham's 1959 visit to New Zealand, the crusade meetings featured the hymn *How Great Thou Art*.

Graham asked Māori Anglican priest Reverend Wi Te Tau Huata of Ngāti Kahungunu whether there was a Māori-language version of the hymn. Elers, who also has Ngāti Kahungunu whakapapa, said that connection made the story especially meaningful for him.

Together with Reverend Sam Rangihū, Huata identified an existing Māori hymn, *Te Ariki, hei a*



**Sir Howard Morrison had a number 1 hit singing the US evangelist Billy Graham-inspired hymn *How Great Thou Art/Whakaaria Mai*.**

Photo / Billy Graham Evangelistic Association



**Māori Anglican minister and academic Dr Steve Elers (back right).**

*au koe noho ai*, a translation of the hymn *Abide With Me*, which shared the same metre.

Te reo Māori words were then set to the tune of *How Great Thou Art*, creating the version now widely known as *Whakaaria Mai*.

The project also reflects Graham's later connection to LeTourneau University, where he served on the university's board of trustees from 1961 to 1975. When the university's founder, R.G. "Pop" LeTourneau, died in 1969, Graham sent his longtime musical associate, George Beverly Shea, to sing *How Great Thou Art* at the funeral.

"Many New Zealanders know the hymn *Whakaaria Mai*, but very few know the story of how Billy Graham's visit helped shape the version that is sung across the country today," Elers

told the *Herald*.

"This is one of my favourite hime to play on guitar. Three chords, unless you want to sound flash and add an E minor in there too," said Elers.

The hymn was a No 1 hit in 1982 for Sir Howard Morrison.

Griffin said learning the hymn was a great and meaningful experience.

"It was an honour to learn and sing this hymn. The message of the Gospel crosses languages and cultures.

"Steve told me that the Māori people are like Texans in that they love their faith, family and food. So I would love to visit your beautiful country and fellowship with y'all," Griffin said.

The official music video was filmed at the Belcher Centre on the LeTourneau University campus in Longview, Texas.

A companion behind-the-scenes video also explores the history of the hymn and the story behind the project.

"We have chapel here on campus a couple of times a week [Mondays and Wednesdays]. It is usually packed full of students each time," Elers said. "LeTourneau University is a Christian [interdenominational] university – not affiliated with any denomination.

"I am an Anglican priest back home in Te Hui Amorangi ki Te Upoko o Te Ika [part of the Anglican Church of Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia] under Bishop Waitohiariki Quayle, and I am also licensed to the Episcopal Diocese of Texas [the Episcopal Church is the US member of the Anglican Communion].

"I take services every Sunday at churches across East Texas because there is a shortage of clergy. Sometimes I take services at two different churches on the same Sunday.

"One of my favourite churches is St John the Baptist in Tyler, Texas. It is a historical African American church.

"It's all older folks who attend that church, and they remind me of our kaumātua back home.

"The East Texas churches ask me all the time to embed our reo into the services."

## Tāmaki battle heats up as Act Party eyes fresh contender

Adam Pearse

Former National Party candidate James Christmas, who was tipped as a potential minister and Attorney-General, will contest this year's election as a candidate for the Act Party.

He is one of eight people vying to become Act's candidate in Auckland's Tāmaki electorate, which will be an intriguing contest after the departure from politics of MP Brooke van Velden, also Act's deputy leader.

Christmas, a barrister who worked under senior National figures including Sir John Key, Sir Bill English and Chris Finlayson, will be considered a significant loss for National given he was considered a possible option to take on the Attorney-General role and act as a Treaty Negotiations Minister.

With a deep understanding of

Treaty settlements and New Zealand's constitutional arrangements, Christmas also presents as an ideal candidate to articulate the party's next attempt at constitutional reform after the failed Treaty Principles Bill, which Christmas' former mentor Finlayson condemned as divisive.

Speaking exclusively to the *Herald*, Christmas acknowledged some in National might be "disappointed" by his decision but he insisted it was not prompted by any ill will towards his former party.

"I've looked at where I can make the biggest contribution, and I made a positive decision to [join Act]," he said.

"It's no more complicated than that, there's no hidden story there."

Act leader David Seymour is welcoming his newest candidate and

### Other contenders are

- Antonia Modkova (ranked 12th on Act's 2023 list), Pat Arroyo, Henrietta Devoe, Helena Roza, Mike Schmidt, Malkiat Singh and Paul Wedding.
- From Monday, party members in the electorate can vote for their preferred candidate before a final decision made by the party's board, which will be announced on April 20.

isn't ruling out Christmas holding a leadership role in the party in the future.

"There's always the possibility, but let's just see if we can get him elected to Parliament first."

Christmas, 40, worked for Finlayson during the last National Government's tenure from 2008-2017 when the latter was Attorney-General, Treaty Negotiations Minister and in charge of the spy agencies.

Christmas went on to work as an adviser to Key and English when they were Prime Minister before going out on his own as a lawyer in Auckland.

In 2023, Christmas was ranked 28th on National's party list before the general election.

Christmas then put his political ambition to one side for a year before picking it back up in 2025.

Describing himself as a "classical liberal" who had supported Act at university, Christmas believed liberalism "really does find a home in Act".

"But I think one thing I do like about Act is they are willing to go out on a limb for those things when required."

He pointed to Act's opposition to legislation banning greyhound racing, which was passed recently with support by the other five parties

in Parliament.

His former mentor Finlayson was a prominent critic of Seymour's bill, regularly urging Luxton and National to withdraw support.

Christmas wouldn't expand on his own view of the bill and answered carefully when asked whether he'd debated the matter with Finlayson, who Christmas said had been supportive of his decision to become an Act candidate.

"I keep in touch with Chris and we discuss stuff from time to time, but his views on stuff aren't determinative on me, and my views are certainly not determinative on Chris."

Christmas confirmed he was one of eight people vying to be Act's Tāmaki candidate after Brooke van Velden's surprise announcement she was leaving politics last month.