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## Whakaaria Mai: New music video reveals US evangelist Billy Graham's connection to magical Māori hymn



**Joseph Los'e**

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**The back story of Whakaaria Mai**

**NOW PLAYING** • The back story of Whakaaria Mai

How American evangelist Billy Graham created the popular Māori Hymn, Whakaaria Mai. Video / Le Tourneau

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.



Māori Anglican minister and academic Dr Steve Elers. Photo / Supplied

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 Waikato and Kingitanga historian Mamae Takerei, 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.



American evangelist Billy Graham spoke to a packed out Carlaw Park in 1959. Photo / Te Ara Encyclopedia of New Zealand.

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.

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**HOW GREAT THOU ART**

Sir Howard Morrison

The image is a promotional graphic for a music chart. It features a central photograph of Sir Howard Morrison, an elderly man with grey hair, wearing a black suit and holding a wooden walking stick. He is smiling and has his hands clasped around the top of the stick. The background of the photo is a light grey with faint musical notation and chord symbols. Above the photo, the text reads 'HOW GREAT THOU ART' in large, bold, red letters, followed by 'THE VERY BEST OF' in smaller red letters, and 'SIR HOWARD MORRISON' in red. To the left of the photo is a red square with a white number '1'. Below the photo, the title 'HOW GREAT THOU ART' is repeated in large, bold, black letters, and 'Sir Howard Morrison' is written in white on a red rectangular background. At the top left, a red banner contains the dates '18 December-14 January 1982'. At the top right, there is a red circular logo with a white bar chart icon. The entire graphic is set against a dark red background with a white border.

Sir Howard Morrison's *How Great Thou Art* was a Ni 1 in New Zealand in 1982.

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 hīmene 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.



LeTourneau University student Glory Griffin sings How Great Thou Art in English and Te Reo Māori. Photo / Supplied

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].



Anglican minister Dr Steve Elers with some of the congregation at the St John the Baptist in Tyler, Texas, USA. Photo / Supplied

"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."

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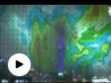




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**Joseph Los'e was chief reporter, news director at the *Sunday News* newspaper covering crime, justice and sport. He was also editor of the *NZ Truth* and prior to joining NZME worked for urban Māori organisation Whānau Waipareira.**



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