

The dedicated team behind the other book of Mormons

■ Liam Mannix

In a windowless underground room, six Mormons are cheerfully working day-in day-out to digitise the records of dead Victorians. So they can be baptised. One by one, many of the dead – Mormon or not – are being offered salvation by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints' controversial Baptisms for the Dead process.

The work in the basement of the Victorian Archives Centre is painstaking, mentally mind-numbing. The Mormons love it.

They recently finished digitising court records; "those were just fun to read – even though we're not supposed to take time to read them", Nanette Justus beams.

Victoria's historic records are housed at an underground storage facility in North Melbourne, managed by the Public Record Office.

The records – 100 kilometres of paper, plus countless photographs and reels of film – are behind an airlock in cold storage.

The records office has been working at it for 10 years. So far 1.34 per cent of the collection has been digitised, with a large part of that done by Mormon labour.

In the basement the six Mormons are on an 18-month mission from America as part of the church's global FamilySearch program, which sends volunteer archivists all about the world.

The scanned records go back to Salt Lake City and are inserted into a



Mormon volunteers at the Victorian Archives Centre. Inset: Some of the sorted documents. Photo: Eddie Jim.

global database, allowing Mormons worldwide to piece together their family trees. The data is also shared with several private ancestry sites, including Ancestry.com. The Public Record Office also gets a copy; the Mormons are essentially free labour.

The church sends teams of missionaries all around the world to work on similar digitisation programs. Why? To offer salvation to the dead.

When a Mormon finds an ancestor in the records, they can baptise them

into the Mormon faith. That allows the dead relative's soul to be saved, even if they did not die a Mormon. And it swells the ranks of the church.

However, it's not just ancestors getting baptised. The practice hit the spotlight in 2012 when it emerged Mormons were enthusiastically baptising many non-relatives. Holocaust victims, Gandhi, Marilyn Monroe, Elvis and reportedly even Hitler have all been baptised.

The church has promised to crack down on such instances.

To baptise a dead ancestor, a living relative must stand in their place, submerging themselves in water to allow the dead to be born again as Mormons. "One of my sons was baptised for my grandfather. It's quite powerful to be involved," says Chris Stuart, the church's public affairs director.

While those baptised may not have been Mormons in life, the church does not believe they are

being baptised against their will.

"We believe that life goes beyond this one, and that people still have their agency. They have the choice to either accept or reject that," says Mr Stuart.

