Bringing compassionate touch to Cambodian kids

For three years, Religious Education leader Mike Norman has traveled to a remote Southeast Asian orphanage to give healing massages to HIV-positive children.

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Touch is something babies need, children crave and adults long for. In fact, it’s critical for the emotional, physical and spiritual well-being of every human being.

Mike Norman, associate director of the Office of Religious Education who oversees youth programs, has found this out first hand. For the last three years as a volunteer with “Heart Touch,” he’s traveled with a team to an orphanage in Cambodia that cares for more than 200 HIV-positive children. At the 18-acre compound divided into eight large family-style units, the men and women who are mostly professional massage therapists practice the art of compassionate touch therapy. The results are often nothing short of miraculous.

“How it works at Our Village is the team they’re giving the volunteers massage. They explain how certain touches they’ve learned from the Heart Touch training helps with healing. ‘The whole idea is to help the children connect with the massage therapist and feel comfortable with the touch. The massage therapist is also helping the children develop a sense of trust and security.’”

Norman points out that their massage is not the laying-down-on-a-table, covered-with-a-towel traditional kind. Instead, most of the orphans are rubbed while sitting outside on benches. They just roll up their sleeves and pants so lotion can be rubbed on their arms and legs. A good bench massage takes 20 to 30 minutes, starting with the neck and shoulders, then the arms and finally the legs and feet.

But what often happens when a line forms is the kids start imitating the Heart Touch volunteers and wind up trying to massage each other. So by the second week they’re really into it, according to Norman, and on the last day they’re even giving the volunteers massages. The team also teaches the caretakers at Our Village how to continue the compassionate touch therapy when they’re gone.

“I’ve gotten really close to the kids, like one named Thavry who came here last year for Youth Day at the Religious Education Congress,” he says. “They’re become family, and I think my two weeks there gives me more satisfaction than anything else I do,” he says.

Massage Line — A Heart Touch volunteer massages a boy as she gets an impromptu rub herself.

GROUP SHOT — Norman, squatting, poses with seven other 2010 Heart Touch volunteers and New Hope for Cambodian Children founders Kathy (second from left) and John (far right) Tucker.

Satisfaction — Mike Norman holds an infant at Our Village. “I think my two weeks there gives me more satisfaction than anything else I do,” he says.