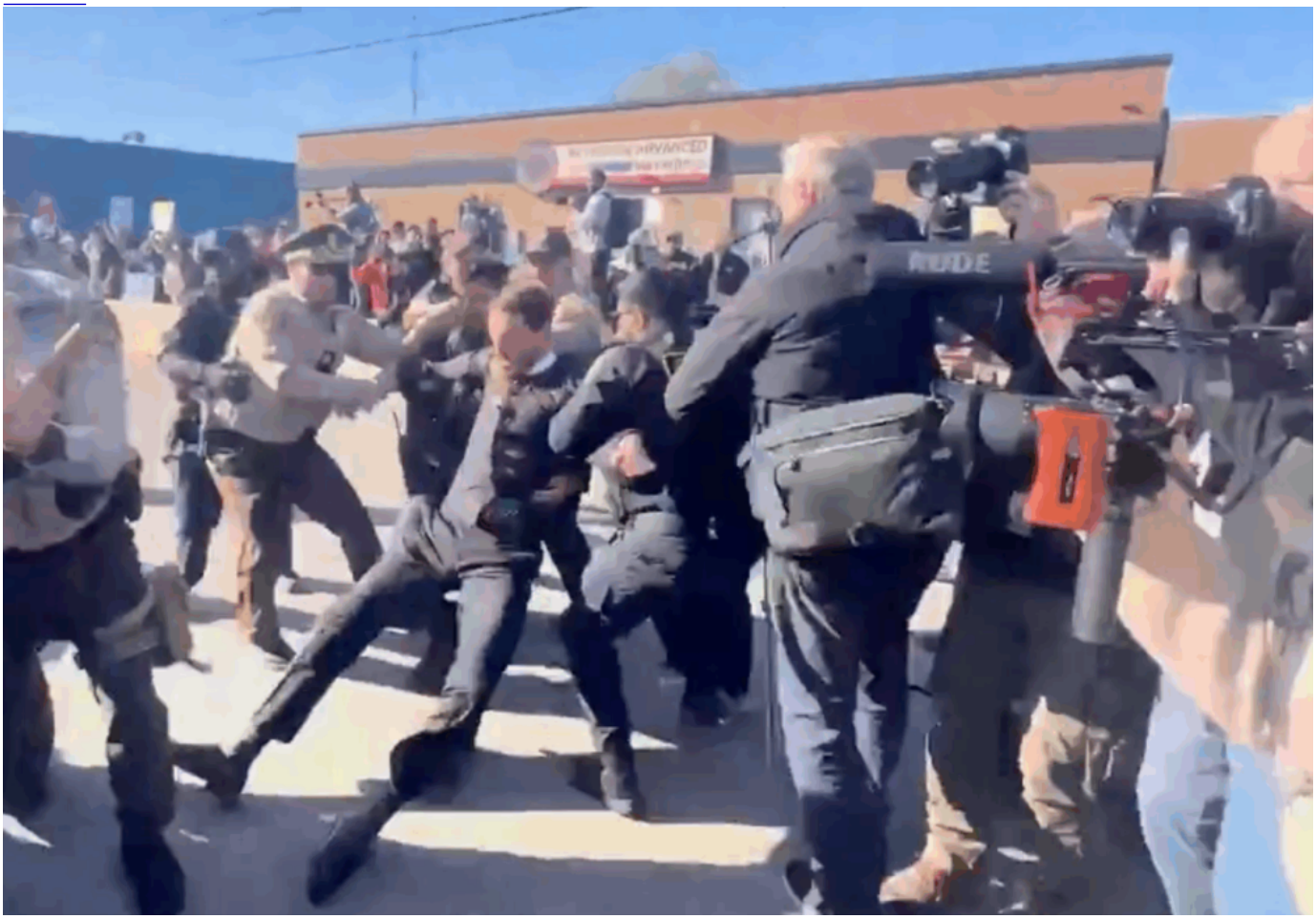
News



The Rev. Michael Woolf, center, is pulled from a group of demonstrators by police officers outside the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement detention facility in Broadview, Illinois, Nov. 14. (RNS/Video screen grab)

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In video recorded on Nov. 14 outside the embattled U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement facility in Broadview, Illinois, the Rev. Michael Woolf stands alongside fellow protesters, fiddling awkwardly with his backpack as faith leaders and other protesters chant slogans at a line of police officers. A moment later, one officer can be seen walking forward, grabbing Woolf by the wrist and yanking.

Demonstrators attempted to hold on to Woolf, who was wearing a clerical collar, but four officers wrenched him from the crowd and tossed him to the ground. After turning him onto his stomach, officers proceeded to arrest Woolf, and removed him to the Cook County Sheriff's Office in Maywood, Illinois.

"I've got bruises all over my body," Woolf, an American Baptist minister who is pastor of Lake Street Church of Evanston, Illinois, told Religion News Service. He was speaking in his first interview since being released Nov. 14 afternoon after about seven hours in custody.

Woolf said when he asked the arresting officers to loosen the plastic handcuffs that were causing his hands to go numb, an officer replied: "Nobody wants to talk to you — shut the f–k up."

"It's part of the dehumanizing nature of it, and it gives me a lot of clarity around what's happening here," said Woolf, who has been active in protests against ICE. "It's really a spiritual emergency."

Footage and images of Woolf's arrest were shared widely on the Internet, drawing attention to the demonstration at the ICE facility, where protests have become commonplace in recent weeks. Organizers said at least 100 faith leaders of various faiths and denominations came to the Broadview facility, highlighting religious pushback to "Operation Midway Blitz," a mass deportation effort that has rounded up hundreds of undocumented immigrants and other Chicago residents since it was launched in September.

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Cook County Police said 21 people were arrested at the demonstration, all but one of whom were charged with "Obstruction/Disorderly Conduct/Pedestrian Walking on Highways." Participants said at least seven of those arrested were faith leaders from Presbyterian, Lutheran, Baptist, Unitarian Universalist and Jewish traditions.

The Department of Homeland Security did not reply immediately to a request for comment, but on Nov. 14 a post on the department's X feed seemed to mock the protest participants, saying, "Womp womp, cry all you want. These criminal illegal aliens aren't getting released," the post read.

The post called the demonstrators "violent rioters" and "imbecilic morons" who need to "get a job."

Asked about the DHS statement, Woolf said he and other protesters were "demanding constitutional and due process rights" for detainees, adding, "I believe that justice will come in this life or the next."

"I know which side I choose. I choose the Gospel," he added.

Law enforcement officers prevent clergy from entering the Broadview ICE facility to offer Com

Law enforcement officers prevent clergy from entering the Broadview ICE facility to offer Communion to immigrants detained inside during an outdoor Mass in the Chicago suburb of Broadview, Illinois, Nov. 1. The Mass was celebrated by Chicago Auxiliary Bishop José María Garcia-Maldonado. (OSV News/Reuters/Leah Millis)

"This is our job," said the Rev. Kristina Sinks, a United Methodist pastor who helped organize a worship service, in reply to the DHS post. Sinks also rejected the suggestion that demonstrators were violent. She later explained via text message that she believes it is the job of clergy to "advocate for the oppressed, the vulnerable, and those dehumanized by any forces of evil and oppression."

Sinks added: "Why does DHS feel threatened by clergy praying? What are they hiding?"

Organizers called the protest one of the largest in a series of demonstrations at the Broadview site, many of which have been led by religious leaders, who say that federal authorities are mistreating the detainees at the facility. The treatment of the detainees is the subject of an ongoing class-action lawsuit.

Sinks said faith leaders began Nov. 14 with a multifaith service outside the Broadview facility to "bear witness to the suffering inside the facility." The participants held daily hygiene products, bread and clean water to "symbolize needs not met" by the government agents who run the facility.

> 'It's really a spiritual emergency.'
> —Rev. Michael Woolf
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Faith leaders from various traditions — Christian, Jewish, Hindu and others — then presented police with a letter from clergy offering spiritual care to the detainees. Organizers, Sinks said, sent DHS an identical letter a week earlier.

Offers of pastoral care and Communion for detainees at the facility have been offered multiple times, only to be rebuffed. Religious leaders have raised the issue as a religious freedom concern. U.S. Catholic bishops on Nov. 12 approved a "special pastoral message on immigration" that expresses their collective solidarity with immigrants amid the Trump administration's aggressive enforcement tactics. On Nov. 4 Pope Leo XIV criticized immigration authorities who refused to let clergy administer Communion to migrants at the detention facility near Chicago.

After clergy were denied access again Nov. 14, video footage from the protest posted on social media showed Woolf and other faith leaders attempting to approach the facility, marching arm-in-arm. The demonstrators were quickly mobbed by police, who began pushing them back. A short time later, police began arresting demonstrators.

Officers from the Illinois State Police and the Broadview Police Department detain demonstrat

Officers from the Illinois State Police and the Broadview Police Department detain demonstrators during a protest against immigration actions outside the Broadview ICE facility in suburban Chicago Nov. 7. (OSV News/Reuters/Carlos Barria)

Several faith leaders at the demonstration expressed shock at the intensity of the police response. The Rev. Quincy Worthington, a Presbyterian Church (USA) minister who has been active in protests against ICE and was in the crowd Nov. 14, said he tried to help up people who had fallen or pushed down who were "being crushed or beaten."

Similarly, the Rev. Hannah Kardon, a United Methodist minister who had been thrown to the ground and arrested at a previous demonstration in Broadview, said in a text message that she saw "overwhelming and unnecessary violence" from "multiple police forces" at the facility.

"I saw knees on necks," she wrote. "I saw people pulled and dragged. I saw people slammed to the ground. Faith leaders were brutalized today for wanting to offer spiritual care to their stolen neighbors. It was horrific."

Clergy have been vocal critics of "Operation Midway Blitz" since it began and said they have repeatedly been met with force by federal, state and local police forces. At least five local clergy, including Woolf, Kardon and Worthington, say DHS forces have shot them with pepper balls. Footage of agents shooting the Rev. David Black, a Presbyterian minister from Chicago, in the head with pepper balls was widely shared on social media.

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As state and local police have become the main force guarding the facility in recent weeks, activists have accused Illinois Gov. JB Pritzker, a critic of Trump and his mass deportation policies, of protecting ICE agents.

The treatment of faith-based protesters is part of the class-action lawsuit as well as a separate case that includes Black as a plaintiff. The latter case resulted in a temporary restraining order limiting federal agents' ability to use violence against protesters, including “religious practitioners.”

Woolf said that after he was arrested, he and other participants continued to pray and worship during the hours they were detained together. They sang songs such as "We Shall Overcome," and some recited poetry.

The pastor added he has been reflecting on "the dehumanizing nature" of his experience, but that "the cruelty that goes on [at] that facility … must be 100 times worse."

This story appears in the **Immigration and the Church** feature series. View the full series.