Opinion
Guest Voices
Federal agents stand by a damaged civilian's car hit by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforc

Federal agents stand by a damaged civilian's car hit by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents in Minneapolis Jan.12, 2026. (OSV News/Reuters/Tim Evans)



by John Dear

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On this week's episode of "The Nonviolent Jesus Podcast," I speak with Mel Duncan, a leader in developing the practice of unarmed civilian protection for over two decades. He started providing nonviolent protective presence along Nicaragua's northern border in 1984 during the Contra war.

In 2002 along with David Hartsough and Mary Lou Ott, he cofounded Nonviolent Peaceforce. Nonviolent Peaceforce's "nonviolent civilian protectors" provide direct protection to civilians caught in violent conflict and work with local groups to prevent further violence and sustain peace in conflict areas including South Sudan, Ukraine, the Philippines and the United States.



Mel Duncan is a cofounder of Nonviolent Peaceforce. (Courtesy of Nonviolent Peaceforce)

Duncan has represented Nonviolent Peaceforce at the United Nations where the group has been granted special consultative status. Recent U.N. global reviews as well as Security Council and General Assembly Resolutions have cited and recommended unarmed civilian protection. The American Friends Service Committee nominated Nonviolent Peaceforce for the 2016 Nobel Peace Prize. In 2018 Nonviolent Peaceforce received the Luxembourg Peace Prize.

Since retiring in 2023, Duncan has helped organize a team of unarmed civilian protectors who are now working in Palestine as "unarmed civilian protection." He worked there for six months in 2025. For the past few months during the ICE occupation, he has been providing protective presence in St. Paul, Minnesota, where he lives.

"How do you confront violence with strategic disciplined nonviolence?" Duncan asks on the podcast. "We've had thousands of people over the last 25 years who have learned Nonviolent Peaceforce skills to take back to their own communities. There are now over 60 other civil society groups now doing this kind of work in 24 areas of the world. We stress the two-hand approach: We resist the injustice with one hand while we reach out to the humanity in every one of us with the other."

When I asked about Palestine, he said, "The violence has intensified greatly since the attacks on Iran and Lebanon. It's provided a cover for Israelis to brutally attack Palestinian civilians. What can people do? As Rabbi Abraham Heschel said, we pray with our feet. Know that the kingdom of God is here and now; it's a consciousness in all of us. Even when it's hopeless, we can continue on."

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