

The missile dispute: pray for those in middle

WHEN THEY gather outside the Williams International plant, vigilers pray for both sides. They utter words on behalf of the people who make cruise-missile parts and in support of those willing to go to jail rather than allow that business to go on as usual.

How about a prayer for the folks who have to see both sides?

Between the peace activists and the people whose paychecks depend on defense buildup are sheriff's deputies, judges and journalists who are struggling hard to be fair to both.

STANDING IN THE middle on such an emotionally charged issue isn't easy. It's simpler to dismiss committed members of either side as "crazies." And a lot of people do just that.

We can't. Our job requires us to go back and forth between both sides — asking questions, listening carefully and trying to balance the positions.

Meanwhile, we try hard not to fall off the tightrope into one camp or the other.

It's amazing how many folks successfully walk that line. In spite of personal beliefs — which all have — they deal respectfully with both poles.

And grapple with the many important

"Next time I'm gonna go for a little old lady," he said with a smile.

• Concerned about a senior-citizen protester, who is deliberately starving, a jailer brainstorms with the inmate's friends about how to get him to eat.

• The mother of a peace activist waves goodbye as a bus takes him to Oakland County Jail. Wiping her tears, she hugs a journalist covering the protest. "I thought it would get easier in time. But it's still hard," she says.

• Sitting in church, a reporter hears that a minister is in jail for protesting at Williams. "We need to pray for him, his wife and child," the pastor says.

• Praying outside a courtroom for a judge whose rulings aren't favorable, peace activists express concern about an illness in his family. They pray about that, too.

WHENEVER ANYONE asks what I think about the nuclear-arms protests, I gulp. "I don't think I'm a reporter,"

Asked how he feels about a Circuit Court decision not to disqualify him in the Williams cases, 52nd District Judge Martin L. Boyle quickly answered, "I don't have feelings. I'm a judge."

But you don't live long enough to be a law officer, judge or journalist without forming some opinions. And it's impossible to work with people for a year and not have some ideas about their causes.

"All judges have personal opinions," said Circuit Judge James Thorburn, upholding Boyle's right to judge the peace activists as well as to believe in controlling nuclear arms.

"A mere personal opinion, however, is not sufficient for disqualification. Were such the law, no case could ever proceed to trial because there would be no court available," Thorburn said.

SEEING BOTH sides of the Williams confrontations is especially tough because of the issue involved. How can you not take a stand on something as important as nuclear warfare?

Most of those involved in the cases freely admit to concerns about nuclear escalation. The dispute comes over how that concern is shown — in the voting booth, by peaceful demonstration or through civil disobedience.

Despite talk about respecting each other's views, neither the Williams company nor Covenant for Peace members are about to compromise

their beliefs. And that makes it even more important for impartial folks to stand by with suggestions.

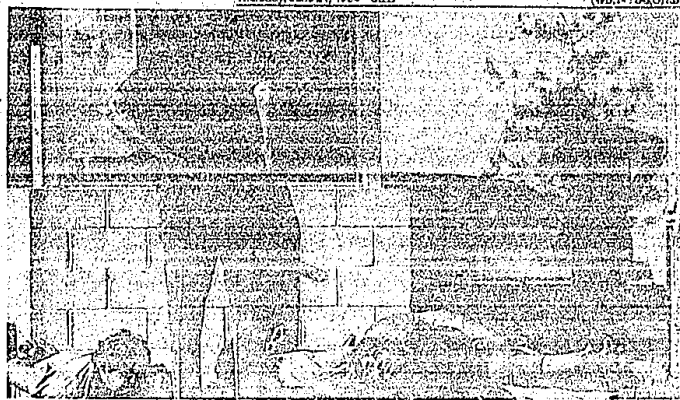
WHAT MAKES IT easier to see both sides is the commitment of the participants.

Intense feelings on the part of the protesters are matched by those of plant workers who want to fulfill their commitments. Opposing a prosecutor who intends to help the workers are 20 defense attorneys volunteering time in the interest of freedom of speech and due process under the law.

Sincerity isn't even an issue. Each side fully acknowledges that the other is doing what it believes in. Which means there are no clear cut winners and losers.

That's a real dilemma for most people, who get to take sides.

But it's a blessing for the folks in the middle — who have to see both.



Handcuffed peace activists talk with a sheriff's deputy while waiting on the grass at Williams International for a bus to take them to the Oakland County Jail.

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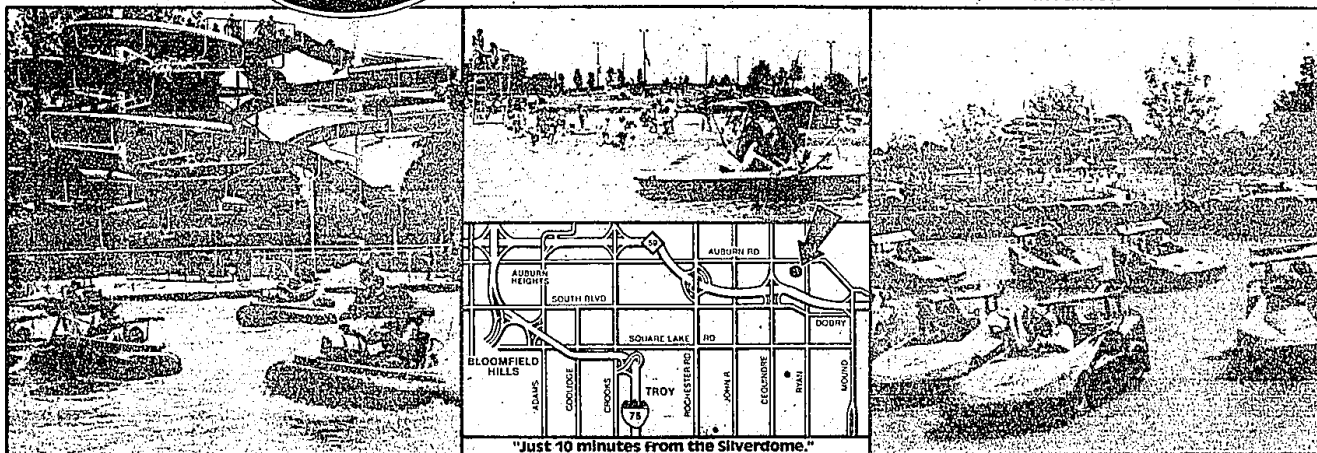
ant issues at stake in Commerce Township — nuclear warfare, freedom of speech, due process under the law, the right to operate a legal business and freedom to work without being hassled.

BEHIND THE SCENES at Williams:
• An Oakland sheriff's deputy kids a peace activist outside a courtroom about how heavy he was to carry.



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