Interviewer: What are some of the various approaches to dealing with conflict?

Moni: There are three basic recognized approaches to dealing with conflict in the literature: conflict management, conflict resolution, and conflict transformation. Let me explain.

Conflict is not necessarily a bad thing. Some conflicts can be helpful. For example, in testing ourselves against a perceived enemy we may become stronger. We may learn what is important to us. We may even make new friends or change our perceptions, attitudes, or plan of action. In approaching conflict, therefore, in some instances, we may choose merely to manage it rather than seek to eliminate it. Thus, the first approach is called conflict management. The conflict will not go away. We may determine that the best approach is to deal with it creatively so that it brings about the fewest detrimental consequences.

The second approach is conflict resolution. The goal here is to eliminate conflict, to resolve it. In this situation, the conflict is seen as undesirable, as something to put behind us. An entire academic field of study has developed with this focus in mind. In fact, when most people think of dealing with conflict, they think it should be eliminated or resolved.

The third major approach to conflict is conflict transformation. Here, the goal is neither to manage conflict nor to eliminate; instead, according to John Paul Lederach, a famous writer in this field, the goal is to “bring about changes in the personal, relational, structural, and the cultural dimensions. In other words, the goal is to effect personal transformation, so key concepts include forgiveness and conversion.

There is, of course, some overlapping among these approaches, and often the entire area of study and practice is simply called “conflict resolution.”

Interviewer: Which of these approaches seems most desirable for ministers?

Moni: People of faith often argue that conflict transformation is the ideal because it aims to move people’s minds and hearts. A context of faith seems to be more suitable to conflict transformation, while the model of choice in the business world might be conflict resolution. In business, it is “the bottom line” that matters most, at least in a capitalistic system. Relationships are a means toward that end. For people of faith, however, relationships matter most, i.e., one’s relationship with God and God’s creation. If it is true that conflict is inevitable, then what we intend or hope for is very important. How we approach conflict depends upon how we see ourselves in relation to the world about us. Of course, there are times when conflict management and conflict resolution are desirable, even for persons of faith. It is our overall approach to conflict in general that influences our desired approach to individual conflicts.