



# Bonsai Theory of Church Growth

*Ken Hemphill, Kenneth Priest*

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The bonsai pot may be the most identifiable accessory for growing bonsai trees. The pots come in numerous shapes and sizes. Some are very shallow, designed for planting a bonsai forest (several trees grouped together). Others are tall and somewhat narrow, used primarily for trees that cascade downward. Many look simply like miniature versions of more familiar flower pots. Most are ornate ceramic pots with Oriental-looking scenes and beautiful glazes. All of them are expensive when you consider their relative size. You might think that you wouldn't have to pay so dearly for such a small hunk of clay. After only a cursory reading of my collection of bonsai books, I discovered that fitting the right pot to the right tree was an integral part of growing bonsai. The bonsai grower must take into account factors such as the size, shape, and color of the tree when making this crucial decision. In my case I added a fourth criterion – price. Once the pot and the plant have been chosen, you're ready to go to work. The small tree must be placed in just the right position in the pot for the proper aesthetic beauty. Once this task has been completed you have embarked on your bonsai journey. Yet the pot is much more than a simple decorative holder for a little tree. The pot in many ways helps to determine the size of the tree. The beautiful glazed dish must hold the dirt and roots that will support the tree's healthy growth. One of the secrets to the small size of the bonsai is the limited space for root growth. This discovery about little trees applies to churches as well. The size of the container in which a congregation is planted will in many ways determine the size it will grow to in maturity. We have seen this principle at work in the plants inside our home. Let's say, for example, that you purchase a small decorative fig tree from the local nursery. It comes to you in a one gallon container. You place your prized possession by an appropriate window and water it on a regular schedule and watch as it grows naturally for a year or so. We are surprised to see that it will grow with the virtual "benign neglect" that many of our plants receive. After about a year, you notice that the color of the leaves appears to be less vibrant and that some are actually falling from the tree. You continue to water your prized possession and even add a bit of fertilizer, but to no avail. What's the problem? It has become root-bound. The root structure has outgrown the one gallon container. The tree must be dug up, the roots untangled, and the tree repotted in a more spacious container if growth is to continue. If the container can impede the growth of a perfectly healthy house plant, then the "church pot" can inhibit natural growth, even in a healthy church. Bonsai pots come in different shapes and sizes, but all are designed to keep the root structure of the plant small. In like manner, there are different "pots" your church must think about to promote healthy growth.

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