Where does the Christingle come from?

A few years ago the Children’s Society made a big celebration of 50 years of Christingles. There was even a special Songs of Praise service. This lead a lot of people to mistakenly think that the Christingle was invented by the Children’s Society just 50 years ago.

The origin of the Christingle goes back 275 years. The custom of giving a special candle to children started in the Moravian Church in Germany in 1747, when the minister Johannes de Watteville was looking for a way to illustrate to them the love that the birth of Christ could kindle, even in the youngest heart. Each of the children were given a beeswax taper with a red ribbon tied around it. Just as the smallest candle flame can give light in the darkness, so too can the smallest soul shine with the love of God.

This gifting of a symbolic candle to children at Christmas caught on with Moravian congregations in Great Britain. In 1755 the first Children’s Christmas Candle Service was held at the Moravian School in Fulneck, England. As celebrating Christmas grew more elaborate in the Victorian era, the Moravian Churches began to decorate the candles with an orange, and fruits stuck on goose quills. These decorated candles were called Christingles, and congregations began calling the Children’s Christmas Candle Service ‘the Christingle Service’.

The earliest officially recorded incidence of the giving of a decorated ‘Christingle’ to children was at Malmesbury Moravian Church in 1868. That same Christmas, McMillan’s magazine published a poem entitled ‘Christingles’, which described the Christingle and how to make it. Soon after, as children became more educated, they were able to read the poem in their school reading books.

This decorative candle and its picturesque Moravian service continued to spread in popularity, and it caught the attention of the BBC. In the 1940s and 50s, several Moravian Churches broadcast their Christingle service on both radio and television. In 1958, Christingles appeared again on TV when scenes from Gracehill’s Christingles Service were chosen for the Royal Prologue to the Queen’s Christmas Day Speech.

Later, in 1968, the Children’s Society embraced the Christingle, and what it represents, to raise funds for their work. In 1997, the Society held a special service in Liverpool Cathedral, attended by the Moravian Church, to celebrate the 250th Anniversary of that first service for children held by Johannes de Watteville in 1747.

The Moravian Church welcomes the widespread use of its Christingle custom, and hopes that its original meaning as a gift given freely to each of us in the same way that God’s love is given freely to us, without us needing to ‘earn’ it, continues to shine through as each child receives their Christingle.

More information can be found in articles written by Br Kit Shorten in the October and November 2021 issues of the Moravian Messenger which is available online at the Moravian Website www.moravian.org.uk