

Society of African Missions - Secretaries and meetings

Who is the SMA Secretary?

He is not the personal secretary of the Superior and Council, but he is the **Secretary of the Congregation**. He received a specific mandate for a service to the Congregation. The SMA Secretary lives the charism through the service to the Congregation.

What are the duties and responsibilities of a SMA Secretary?

The Secretary is responsible for:

- Ensuring meetings are effectively organised and minuted.
- Maintaining effective records and administration.
- Upholding the legal requirements of governing documents, charity law, company law, etc. (where relevant)
- Communication and correspondence.

TODAY WE WILL FOCUS ON THE MEETINGS

A Secretary's role is to ensure smooth running of meetings and this involves activities before, during and after meetings.

First, an initial step that is essential, though. **Take time to re-read the SMA Constitutions, Directory and Policies.** Find a way to make them user-friendly... This will help you a lot in your work.

Additionally you need to be aware of:

- Where you can find "instructions" for what you are doing.
- Where the documents you might need are located.
- How electronic archives are organized.
- Who can offer you support in your service, and what their expertise is (look not only among the internal SMA group but also among lay people who work with you or other outside people that you know)

BEFORE THE MEETING

1. Be constantly in touch with the Chairperson

The Chairperson for the Council meeting is the Superior.

If you are supporting other types of meeting the reference will be to the head of the Committee or of the Working Group.

You need to:

- Ensure to understand the reason of the meeting;
- Determine meeting objectives;
- Prepare the meeting agenda.

2. Starting with the agenda Gather all the useful materials and information

This includes for each agenda item:

- The needed materials (e.g., applications, letters, forms, or other papers);
- The "historical" information (e.g.: if this is a request for renewal of absence: when it was originally granted, what was the reasons, for how long...);
- The "legal" information (e.g., what is provided in this specific case in the Constitutions, Directory, Policies, Canon Law...)

Be aware that the Secretary often acts as an information and reference point for the Chairperson and other members and clarifying past practice and decisions.

3. Read and review all meeting materials.

You must be sure that the material is complete and well organized.

Sometimes you need to help your brother to prepare the material. Send them the form, offer them a support in order to fill in the form, encourage them to be brief and clear.

Of course, I'm not talking about influencing the content of what is written in any way, but sometimes it can be helpful to support people in their "style" and make sure that the document contains all the information that will be useful for the decision. (e.g. if the person forgot an answer...)

4. Complete the agenda and send out the materials

After reviewing the agenda and materials collected with the Chairperson, it is necessary to send the agenda and materials to all people who will attend the meeting.

It's a good idea to send out the meeting agenda in advance so that everyone can make suggestions and contribute to it. It is also important to consider that the materials must be sent to the Councillors with a suitable time to allow each person to read and, if necessary, to discern on it.

Clarity should be offered with respect to the time, the place and the manner of the meeting (in presence, zoom meeting, other forms...).

The agenda must be detailed day by day... but it is always necessary to be flexible... you never know what is going to happen during a meeting!

Guidelines: Never forget that you are a part of a more complex body.

What I have described to you in the 4 points below can be accomplished in many different ways.

Look for the way that best suits your abilities and the abilities of the people you work with... And be aware of your weaknesses too.

AT THE MEETING

During the meeting, the Secretary has two essential tasks:

1. Support the work of the Superior and his Council.

This includes a variety of aspects:

- offer useful "historical" information (e.g. summarizing what happened on that topic in previous meetings);
- offering "legal" information (whether under the Proper Law, the Canon Law, or the State Laws);
- gather information that the team believe necessary for discernment (e.g. contact a brother and ask for clarification with respect to a request);
- prepare the draft of documents (such as communications to members or outlines of work);
- offer advice if requested by the group.

2. Preparing the Minutes of the meetings.

It should be emphasized the importance of the minutes of council meetings: in them must be preserved the faithful historical memory of the journey that the Superior and his Council make in guiding the Congregation and seeking God's will. It must express with fidelity and objectivity the debates, the diversity of opinions, and not be limited to mere conclusions. Decisions then should be well stated as such and not as mere notes of the chronicle of the council. If votes are reached, it must be stated clearly and precisely the subject of the resolution, according to the wording presented by the Superior.

Requirements of minutes may vary but should include at a minimum:

- Date, time, location of meeting;
- List of those present and absent (indicating clearly the number of those with active voice)
- List of items discussed;

For each topic:

- ✓ Title;
- ✓ List of materials/reports presented;
- ✓ Summary of the main areas of discussion on the topic;
- ✓ Clear description of what the Council has decided and, if possible, the reasons why;
- ✓ What kind of vote was taken (specify whether it was secret) and what was the result of the vote (e.g., unanimous, majority, one person abstained)
- ✓ Specify who must execute the decision and by when;
- ✓ Clearly describe any recommendations, challenges or solutions that the Council wishes to offer.

Using a meeting minutes template can save you a lot of time and energy. If you use the same template on a recurring basis this can also foster some familiarity.

The SMA Generalate Offices already use a specific template, which I encourage you to also use at your level.

Personally, I don't know the format of your meetings, so I will simply present two basic modes, which then freely each person can adapt to different needs.

MODEL A: Meeting of a few hours with a few focused discussion topics.

Use the template below for each of the topics discussed.

Title

DATE, PLACE	
ATTENDEES	
NOTE TAKER	

DISCUSSION		
CONCLUSIONS		
ACTION ITEMS	PERSON RESPONSIBLE	DEADLINE

MODEL B: The meeting takes place over a large time frame with a busy agenda.

Include the general information about the meeting on the first page.

Attach the complete and detailed agenda of the meeting (revised at the conclusion of the meeting showing exactly the time for discussion and decision on each topic).

Meeting no. 11 of the SMA Team....

DATE	From: January 5, 2023 To: January 11, 2023
PLACE	Rome – Via della Nocetta, 111
ATTENDEES	Vote members: xxxxxx (General Superior), xxxxx, xxxx, xxxx (Councilors) Other members: xxxxxx (Formation Director)
NOTE TAKER	Xxxxxx (General Secretary)
AGENDA	The detailed agenda of the meeting is attached to the minutes (annex 1)

Proceed to draft the Minutes according to the topics specifying in the decision part also the exact date.

Request for renewal of vows of xxxx, SMA

DISCUSSION		
	xxxx	
CONCLUSIONS		
	On January 10, 2023, at 10:50 a.m., the Superior General with the unanimous consent of the Council, approved xxxx's request for renewal of vows.	
	The team recommends that.....	
ACTION ITEMS	PERSON RESPONSIBLE	DEADLINE
The Formation Director: - will notify xxx of the decision and recommendations offered through a personal communication and a subsequent written letter. - Will consider with the Superior the appropriate course of action and date of renewal.	Formation Director xxxxx, SMA	January 20, 2023

Each of you may also choose a different way. For example, there are secretaries who choose to report in chronological order what happens during the Council. This implies that the same topic can be brought up several times during the course of the Minutes. It is an option that I personally find not practical historically, though. Those who will try to find information on that topic in the future will have to review the full minutes very carefully.

SOME IMPORTANT CLARIFICATIONS:

Don't be either too brief or too detailed: Never forget that the minutes must be clear and should have enough information to help future members to understand what decisions were made and why. Meeting minutes provide a historical record of the Council's discussions, decisions, and long-term planning.

Be clear about the nature of the Council's decisions: Were they collegial acts? Or did the Superior need the consent of the Council? Or perhaps the advice of the Council was needed? Everyone taking part in meetings needs to be clear about these distinctions, especially the Secretary General. Make sure you know this information before the meeting begins. If appropriate, make this essential information known to the group prior to the decision.

Be respectful: In the work of a leadership team we are sometimes faced with very sensitive situations. In reporting facts and discussions on those issues, it is always appropriate to be respectful and avoid, as much as possible, reporting negative judgments against the brothers. There are always ways to present those topics objectively and clearly, without "judging" anyone.

Collect all attachments in an organized manner: various documents will be considered during the meeting. Make sure that they are all listed in detail and that within the minutes, for each item discussed, there are clear references to the relevant materials.

Find ways to make your job easier: it is not hard to guess that it's not always easy to keep attention and to be able to remember the essential details of a meeting. That's why it's appropriate to look for modalities that can help us.

It is certainly essential to take notes (either by hand or in electronic format) that record the key words, so that they can be included in the minutes.

There are secretaries who ask to the group the permission to record the meeting. In that case the secretary will have to take care that the recordings are then destroyed when the minutes are approved and printed in final form.

Other people help themselves by filling in -- in advance -- some the parts of the minutes (e.g., the attachments the type of decision to be made...)

AFTER THE MEETING

At the end of the meeting, the Secretary completes the minutes, but also ensures that the decisions taken by the Team are clearly communicated and they are implemented.

We can identify some specific tasks:

1. Prepare the **Follow-up paper**: it is useful to prepare a paper where the actions to be taken are clearly listed, based on the decisions made, who is responsible for the action, and the deadline by which it must be done. This information is generally already included in the minutes, but considering that the final version of the minutes is not always available quickly, the follow-up paper

helps the group to efficiently move the work forward. You can easily use the last line of your template.

ACTION ITEM	PERSON RESPONSIBLE	DEADLINE

In order to help the Secretary to do his job with accuracy, each of the "person responsible" should notify to the Secretary that he has completed his task and send any related materials (e.g., if the person is in charge of communicating a decision in writing, he will send the Secretary the letter).

The Secretary will then update the follow up sheet.

Or the Secretary may prompt an action if it has not yet been carried out. Never forget that support one another in getting tasks done make the work easier for all.

2. Communications

Sometimes the Secretary is also in charge of communications with individual members of the congregation or with the entire group.

It is the responsibility of the Superior to entrust the Secretary --or another member of the Council or another Member of the Congregation-- with the task of communicating decisions and any other useful information.

Even if the task is entrusted to a person other than the Secretary, the Secretary always remains a point of reference and support, clarifying past practice and decisions; confirming legal requirements; and retrieving relevant documentation.

3. Complete the minutes

This involves:

- An initial review of the text with the Superior. This reading is always useful because it can help the Secretary to revise some parts that are not quite clear, or to add or remove parts that are relevance.
- Sending the draft of the minutes to the people who attended the meeting. Each person should have the possibility to carefully review the document and propose any changes, additions, deletions.
- The Secretary must listen the members of the Council and consider carefully each suggestion, making appropriate changes.
- The text of the minutes, in its final version, will then be presented to the Superior and his Council at the first subsequent meeting available for approval. At that session, before approval, any changes that the Secretary has not been able to clarify previously will be considered together by the whole group.
- After approval, the minutes are signed by the Superior and Secretary and properly filed.
- All materials used in the preparation of the document are destroyed (e.g. files of recordings, the initial draft of the minutes, the various stages of editing). Proceeding with the elimination of drafts and records is essential to prevent confusion and discomfort in the future.
- All materials that need to be stored must be placed in their respective folders in paper and/or electronic format.
- Remember that the minute book or electronic printout of minutes should begin with page 1 and No. 1 in the first minute and have continuity of pages and numbers throughout the governing period. Appendices, also sequentially numbered, should be scrupulously added to each minute, minute by minutes.

4. Keeping a diary of future activities

After completing the Minutes, it is useful to mark on a special sheet any future deadlines, related to the topics discussed.

5. Prepare the calendar of meetings

It is always helpful to fix the dates of possible meetings in advance, either related to regular or extraordinary meetings. It is appropriate to define with the Council group how far in advance the dates should be confirmed or cancelled. This depends a lot on the frequency of meetings, but it is always good to have adequate space to carry on the different responsibilities on a regular basis.

FINAL SUGGESTIONS:

- ✓ It is important to note that although the Secretary ensures that these responsibilities are met, much of **the work may be delegated** to paid staff or other brothers or volunteers. I advise you to ask support or to delegate in particular the aspects that are more difficult for you to manage. Being aware of your personal limits helps you manage your work with accuracy.
- ✓ **Have an active and proactive attitude:** the Secretary, even if he is not a member of the Council, is present at the meetings of the Council and could bring his own experience and expertise. In particular, it is essential that he makes proposals for changes and improvements in working methods.
- ✓ **Never forget that your contribution is part of a wider and more complex reality.** It is essential to dedicate time to understand how to share the different responsibilities, how to value each other's gifts, how to support one another.